PRESS NOTE

ENVI Workshop
“EU action to combat marine litter”
Wednesday, 3 May 2017 from 11:30 to 12:30, Altiero Spinelli 3G2
European Parliament, Brussels

On Wednesday 3 May, the European Parliament Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (ENVI) held a workshop entitled “EU action to combat marine litter”. The workshop was chaired by ENVI Rapporteur, Simona Bonafè, as part of the Committee’s follow-up activities on the Commission’s Circular Economy Action Plan (COM(2015)614).

Ms Bonafè MEP stated that the workshop was an opportunity to contribute to the challenge of addressing marine litter in the context of the transition to a circular economy in Europe. She emphasised the complexity of the issue, but also the urgency for action, stating that marine litter is one of the fastest growing threats to the health of the marine biosphere and a driver of socio-economic costs in a range of sectors. Forthcoming actions in the European Commission’s Action Plan on the Circular Economy provide a timely policy window, notably the Plastics Strategy which should be “an important vehicle for addressing marine litter, including specific action on microplastics and implementation of 2030 Sustainable Development Goals targets on marine litter”.

The panel for the workshop comprised of four leading experts who discussed the need for systematic change in our approach to plastics and waste in the economy, stressing that preventative measures should be prioritised before clean-up.

Dr François Galgani, project manager at the French Research Institute for the Exploitation of the Sea (IFREMER), described the global context of marine litter. He presented up to date estimates on the flow of plastics entering the ocean, as well as major sources, their global distribution, and their impacts on marine life. The Mediterranean Sea has one of the highest concentrations of marine litter globally, with an estimated 700 tons entering the Mediterranean per day - illustrating the European relevance of the issue.

Dustin Benton, from Green Alliance, focused on the limitations of marine litter clean-up activities. By illustrating the scale of the world’s oceans and the marine litter problem, he argued that clean-up activities can help, but long-term preventative measures should be the focus for policy makers. The transportation - both vertically and horizontally in ocean columns - and fragmentation of plastic waste in the oceans mean that seemingly innovative clean-up solutions, such as ocean buoys and plastic eating bugs, are likely to be inefficient in both practical and economic terms.

Patrick ten Brink, of the Institute for European Environment Policy (IEEP), examined circular economy measures to address marine litter – i.e. to keep plastic and its value in the economy and out of the oceans. He framed marine litter within the context of plastics and the wider economy to identify major flows and leakages of plastics and locate where different preventative measures might be best applied. Looking at different sectors, including waste
management, fisheries and tourism, he identified a range of impacts and actions. He noted that the tourism and fisheries sectors are both major sources of marine litter and also burdened by this form of pollution, meaning they have both a responsibility and a self-interest to act. He concluded by promoting the waste hierarchy as a tool for prioritising action, underlining that preventing plastic waste is likely to be more cost-effective than clean up.

Dr Heather Leslie, from the Free University of Amsterdam, called for “political leadership and decisiveness” on marine litter, arguing that the issue represented a systemic market failure in the economy. She highlighted that the human health impacts of chemicals in plastics, as well as plastic particulates in the atmosphere remain unknown, and could represent a significant additional impact from plastics in the environment. Drawing on the conclusions of the CleanSea FP7 Project, she called for strong legislation from European policy makers, comprehensive redesign of polluting products, and political engagement of citizens across Europe.

The concluding question and answer session afforded particular attention to eco-design, bioplastics and the European Plastics Strategy. The panel were united in supporting up-stream measures (e.g. eco-design and reparability) and market-based instruments (e.g. deposit refund and extended producer responsibility schemes), as well as investment of EU funds to support the development of effective waste management. These activities have the overarching aim to valorise plastics in the economy. Additionally, it was stressed that bioplastics do not represent a panacea for marine litter.

Ms Bonafè MEP called for continued efforts at the EU level to tackle marine litter and closed the workshop with an outlook towards the forthcoming United Nations Ocean Conference taking place in New York from 5 to 9 June 2017.

Organised by the Policy Department A: Economic and Scientific Policy for the Committee on Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (ENVI)

Contact: Tina Ohliger