

E-0825/10EN

Answer given by Mr Potočník
on behalf of the Commission
(22.3.2010)

The Commission is indeed aware of the increasingly large mass of plastic waste gathering in the North Pacific Gyre and commonly known as the Plastic Soup. Attention was notably drawn to this issue by the intervention of the Dutch Minister during the European Council of Ministers for Environment of 21 October 2009 and the following report on the Lisbon Agreement of 12 November 2009, drafted by the EP Environment Committee rapporteur Ms Anna Rosbach.

However, the Plastic Soup is a very complex issue. In tackling this Great Garbage Patch, hasty conclusions and finger-pointing must be avoided. As pointed out in the reply to the written question E-0104/10¹ by Caroline Lucas, it is very difficult to attribute responsibility for the accumulated waste. Hence the matter would need to be addressed and solved internationally.

Different sources of marine litter are being tackled in different ways by the international community. Concerning garbage from ships, legally binding action has been agreed in the context of the International Maritime Organisation² and it is acknowledged that one main underlying problem is the insufficiency of adequate port reception facilities worldwide. Concerning land-based pollution, a series of measures have been adopted in the framework of the UN Global Programme of Action, but their implementation in certain regions (notably Africa, Asia and Latin America) will depend on increased international assistance for waste management.

While the Commission is concerned with the worrying magnitude of the Pacific Gyre Plastic Soup, it is also aware that this issue is not limited to the Pacific Ocean. In relation to the seas around Europe, including in particular the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, a series of commitments and actions have already been adopted in the context of regional sea conventions (such as OSPAR³ and Barcelona Convention, respectively), often with a focus on problems created by marine litter in the coasts.

Despite these useful regional measures, the Commission considers that marine environmental concerns, including marine litter need to be addressed further within the European legal framework. This has led to the recent adoption of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (Directive 2008/56/EC)⁴, identifying the building up of adequate knowledge as an underlying priority for the effective protection of the marine environment, as there is insufficient data on key concerns such as plastic waste in European seas. For this reason, the first obligation on Member States under the Directive will be to carry out a comprehensive assessment of the status of the marine environment in their waters, including impacts and pressures.

At this stage, the Commission has no plans to make it compulsory to use biodegradable plastics for goods which constitute typical litter. However, in 2009 the Commission launched a study aiming to assess the environmental threats stemming from plastic waste. The issue of the "plastic soups", as well as plastic litter and the potential use of biodegradable plastics will also be looked at in this study. Moreover, the Commission is also in regular contacts with the plastics industry which is concerned by the negative image the "plastic soups" gives them and willing to engage in finding a solution to address this problem.

Only after in-depth scrutiny of the currently available scientific information and active consultation of all stakeholders can we hope to offer concrete proposals to help get rid of the plastic soup and

¹ <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/QP-WEB/home.jsp>

² Annex V of MARPOL 73/78 in the context of IMO.

³ The Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the North-East Atlantic

⁴ OJ L 164, 25.6.2008.

remove its sources. The Commission is currently considering the organisation of a workshop in order to gather the available scientific data on this issue, identify stakeholders and promote an open and constructive debate focussed on concrete solutions.