

Plastic waste and recycling in the EU: facts and figures

Less than a third of plastic waste in Europe is recycled. Find out more facts and figures on plastic waste and its recycling in the EU with our infographic.

The production of plastic has grown exponentially in just a few decades - from 1.5 million of tonnes in 1950 to 322 million of tonnes in 2015 worldwide – and with it the amount of plastic waste.

The EU has already taken [measures to reduce the amount of plastic waste](#), but what happens to the waste that is generated despite all efforts? And how can plastic recycling rates be increased?

Plastic waste treatment in Europe

In Europe, energy recovery is the most used way to dispose of plastic waste, followed by landfill. Some 30% of all the generated plastic waste is collected for recycling and recycling rates by country vary a lot, as shown in the infographic.

Half of the plastic collected for recycling is exported to be treated in countries outside the EU. Reasons for the exportation include the lack of capacity, technology or financial resources to treat the waste locally. Previously, a significant share of the exported plastic waste was shipped to China, but with the country's recent ban on plastic waste imports, it is increasingly urgent to find other solutions.

The low share of plastic recycling in the EU means big losses for the economy as well as for the environment. It is estimated that 95% of the value of plastic packaging material is lost to the economy after a short first-use cycle.

Each year, the production and incineration of plastic emits about 400 million tonnes of CO₂ globally, a part of which could be avoided through better recycling.

Problems with plastic recycling

The main issues complicating plastic recycling are the quality and price of the recycled product, compared with their unrecycled counterpart. Plastic processors require large quantities of recycled plastic, manufactured to strictly controlled specifications and at a competitive price.

However, since plastics are easily customised to the needs (functional or aesthetic) of each manufacturer, the diversity of the raw material complicates the recycling process, making it costly and affecting the quality of the end product. In consequence, the demand for recycled plastics accounts for only 6% of plastics demand in Europe.

Proposed solutions to increase recycling rates

MEPs backed a European strategy for plastic in September, which calls for all plastic packaging waste to be recyclable by 2030. This would imply better design for recyclability, but MEPs believe measures to stimulate the market for recycled plastic are also needed.

These measures could include:

- Creating quality standards for secondary plastics
- Encouraging certification in order to increase the trust of both industry and consumers
- Introducing mandatory rules on minimum recycled content in certain products
- Encouraging member states to consider reducing VAT on recycled products

In parallel, the European Parliament has backed measures to reduce the amount of plastic waste:

- a **ban on certain single use plastics items**
- a **restriction of light-weight plastic bags in the EU** in 2015

MEPs also called on the European Commission to take [action against micro plastics](#).

Find out more

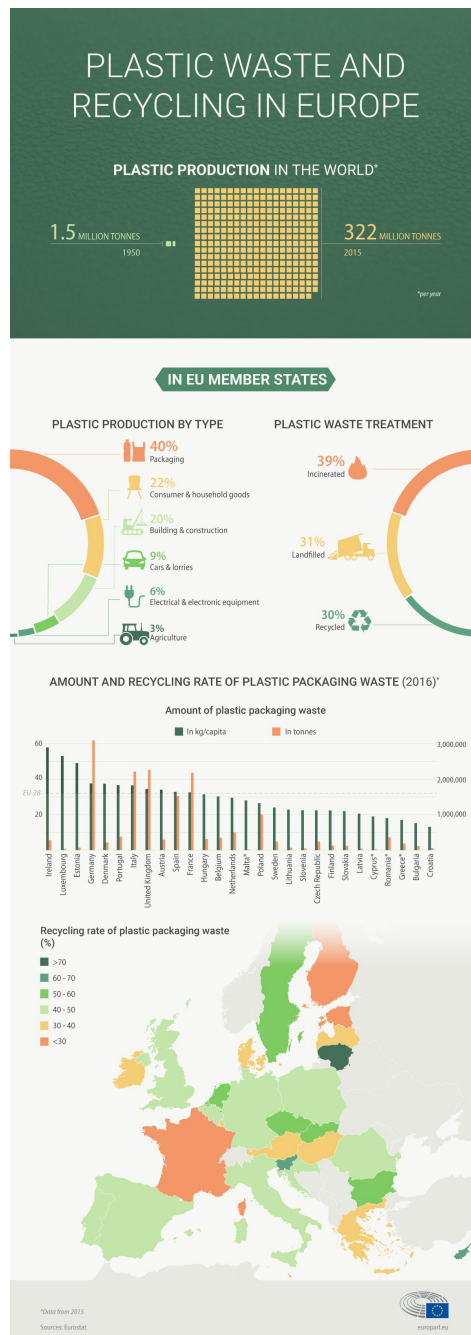
[Check progress on the strategy for plastics](#)

[Parliament resolution on European strategy for plastics in a circular economy](#)

[Commission website on European strategy for plastics](#)

[Commission fact sheet on plastics in Europe](#)

[Commission study on plastic waste in the environment](#)



Find out the facts about plastic waste and recycling in the EU



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