

Plastics in a circular economy

Plastics are widely used across all sectors of the economy. However, the treatment of plastic waste poses several challenges. To address these, the Commission published a strategy for plastics in a circular economy in January 2018. The European Parliament is expected to adopt an own-initiative resolution on the communication during its September 2018 plenary session.

Background

[Plastics](#) are widely used in our economy: in packaging, buildings, cars, electronics, agriculture and other sectors. Global plastics production is 20 times higher than in the 1960s, and is forecast to almost quadruple by 2050. Although there are thousands of types of plastics, 90 % of plastics are derived from virgin fossil fuels. About 6 % of global oil consumption is used to produce plastics; by 2050, this share could reach 20 %. Industry figures indicate that, in Europe, 42 % of post-consumer plastic waste is incinerated with energy recovery, 31 % is recycled and 27 % is landfilled. About 63 % of the plastic waste collected and recycled is treated in the European Union; the remaining 37 % is exported. Cheap, durable and versatile, plastics bring multiple benefits. But these very qualities can also pose problems when plastics end up in the environment, with impacts on nature, the climate and human health. It is estimated that 2 % to 5 % of plastics produced end up in oceans, causing adverse effects in coastal and marine ecosystems. Microplastics are a particular concern, as they can be ingested by wildlife, potentially causing physical harm, affecting fertility and acting as a vector for toxins.

European Commission communication

On 16 January 2018, the European Commission published a [communication](#) laying out a strategy for plastics in a circular economy. The strategy identifies key challenges, including the low reuse and recycling rates of plastic waste, the greenhouse gas emissions associated with plastics production and incineration, and the presence of plastic waste (including microplastics) in oceans. The Commission depicts its 'vision for Europe's new plastics economy', where, among other things, all plastic packaging should be designed to be recyclable or reusable by 2030.

To move towards this vision, the strategy presents a wide range of measures focusing on four areas: (1) improving the economics and quality of plastics recycling; (2) curbing plastic waste littering; (3) driving investment and innovation in the plastics value chain; and (4) harnessing global action.

European Parliament position

On 10 July 2018, the Committee on Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (ENVI) adopted its [report](#) on the Commission communication by 57 votes to 1. The report welcomes the proposal and urges the Commission, among other things, to consider introducing requirements for minimum recycled content for specific plastic products put on the EU market; to come forward swiftly with quality standards for recycled plastics in order to build trust and incentivise the market for secondary plastics; to ban intentionally added microplastics in products as well as oxo-degradable plastics by 2020; to set minimum requirements in product legislation to significantly reduce the release of microplastics at source (in particular for textiles, tyres, paints and cigarette butts); and to fulfil its obligation to review the essential requirements laid down in the Packaging and Packaging Waste Directive by the end of 2020. The report emphasises that although biodegradable and compostable plastics can help support the transition to a circular economy, they cannot be considered a remedy against marine litter or legitimise unnecessary single-use applications.

Own-initiative report: [2018/2035\(INI\)](#); Committee responsible: ENVI; Rapporteur: Mark Demesmaeker (ECR, Belgium).

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