

(English version)

Question for written answer E-000533/19
to the Commission
João Ferreira (GUE/NGL)
(30 January 2019)

Subject: Microplastics pollution in estuaries

A research study by Portugal's Interdisciplinary Centre for Marine and Environmental Research (CIIMAR) has revealed that there are more plastic particles in the Douro River than fish larvae.

Microplastics pollution in estuary ecosystems represents a potential danger for numerous species inhabiting them, either through the ingestion of plastic particles or the particles' driving them out of their homes or blocking out light. There may well also be effects on trophically similar species.

This concentration of microplastics poses problems not only for the fish larvae, but also for the community as a whole and people in the adjacent coastal areas, whose livelihoods depend on the estuary.

— How far advanced are efforts at EU level to achieve the objective of reducing microplastics pollution?

— Is the Commission aware of any ongoing clean-up projects and how effective are they?

— What EU programmes and measures can help prevent this form of pollution and improve environment in the areas affected?

Answer given by Mr Vella on behalf of the European Commission
(29 March 2019)

The European Strategy on Plastics ⁽¹⁾ proposes several specific measures to tackle microplastic pollution.

For microplastics intentionally added to products ⁽²⁾, the Commission asked the European Chemicals Agency (ECHA) to prepare a restriction dossier under REACH ⁽³⁾. ECHA has recently initiated the restriction process with the dossier concluding that health and environmental risks posed by intentionally added microplastics justify an EU-wide restriction ⁽⁴⁾. ECHA's Scientific Committees will now review the dossier and give their opinions on the restriction proposal. Subsequently, an EU-wide restriction adopted by the Commission could be in place by mid-2021.

For unintentionally released microplastics ⁽⁵⁾, the Commission is considering examining policy options. They include measures such as standardisation of methods measuring microplastic emissions, labelling, minimum requirements, or ensuring dissemination of best practices throughout the supply chain. The Commission is currently evaluating the Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive ⁽⁶⁾, including whether it sufficiently addresses the issue of microplastics.

The proposed Single-Use Plastics Directive ⁽⁷⁾, recently agreed in principle by the co-legislators, will ban products made of oxo-degradable plastics from 2021 and aims at curbing the amount of plastic litter in general, thus reducing its subsequent fragmentation into microplastics.

Avoiding littering of plastic waste into the environment, for example with clean-up activities, is essential to reducing the amount of microplastics in nature by eliminating litter that would fragment into microplastics. However, clean-up activities are not a sufficient solution for a problem of such scale. The cornerstone of the EU policy to address microplastics pollution is therefore prevention.

⁽¹⁾ COM(2018) 28 final.

⁽²⁾ e.g. cosmetics, paints or detergents.

⁽³⁾ Regulation (EC) No 1907/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 concerning the Registration, Evaluation, Authorisation and Restriction of Chemicals (REACH), establishing a European Chemicals Agency, amending Directive 1999/45/EC and repealing Council Regulation (EEC) No 793/93 and Commission Regulation (EC) No 1488/94 as well as Council Directive 76/769/EEC and Commission Directives 91/155/EEC, 93/67/EEC, 93/105/EC and 2000/21/EC, OJ L 396, 30.12.2006, p. 1.

⁽⁴⁾ <https://echa.europa.eu/-/echa-proposes-to-restrict-intentionally-added-microplastics>

⁽⁵⁾ e.g. tyres or textiles or spills of plastic pellets.

⁽⁶⁾ https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/initiatives/ares-2017-4989291_en

⁽⁷⁾ Commission Proposal for a directive on the reduction of impact of certain plastic products on the environment — (COM(2018) 340 final).