

Fantastic plastics?

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Opinion

Plastics have a useful place in our society, but the way they are produced is neither affordable nor sustainable, reports Martin Banks.



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According to European Commission statistics, plastic accounts for no less than 85 percent of beach litter and over 80 percent of marine litter. What's more, 87 percent of EU citizens say they are concerned by the environmental impact of plastics.

Global annual production of plastics reached 322 million tonnes in 2015, and is expected to double over the next 20 years. Only 30 percent of plastic waste is collected for recycling, while only six percent of plastic placed on the market is made from recycled materials.

Most EU policy makers welcome the commission's ongoing efforts to reduce marine litter, the most

recent manifestation of which is the draft single use plastics (SUP) directive, released on 28 May.

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MEPs recently adopted a report drafted by ECR group MEP Mark Demesmaecker on the EU plastics strategy. It says that plastic is an important material which has a useful place in our society and economy.

However, the way in which plastics are produced and used is both unaffordable and unsustainable. Demesmaecker's report makes a series of recommendations on dealing with plastic waste and highlights the need not only for an increase in recycling, but also the "quality" of recycling and in turn the creation of a "genuine internal market" for recycled plastic.

Further efforts, he says, must be made to reduce waste in the first place, where the research and innovation could play a significant role in helping businesses and individuals cut waste.

Demesmaecker told this magazine, "My report is not a plea against plastic, but a plea for a circular plastic economy, in which we deal with plastic in a sustainable and responsible way, so that we can stop its harmful effects and preserve the value in the chain. To succeed, we must use this strategy as a lever for circular production and consumption models. We need to deliver tailor-made solutions, as there are no passe-partout solutions. And we must work together across the entire value chain."

"Boosting our recycling performance is a necessary first step, but in itself insufficient to move towards a real circular economy" Mark Demesmaecker MEP

"Boosting our recycling performance is a necessary first step, but in itself insufficient to move towards a real circular economy. I continue to emphasise that. The prevention of plastic waste remains crucial. This can also be done through smart measures on single-use plastic products. In general, I strongly welcome the commission's recent legislative proposal and I am convinced that we can come forward with a strong parliament position."

Julie Girling, an EPP group MEP, has also taken a particularly close interest in the issue. She says, "The reduction of marine litter, and waste more generally, is critically important for a sustainable and ecologically secure future. I believe that increasing public awareness and ambitious legislation will give effect to a greater willingness to combat environmental degradation and help secure a healthy future."

Girling, a member of the parliament's environment, public health and food safety committee, adds,

“When looking at methods of waste reduction it is important not to make the perfect the enemy of the good. However, solutions must be proportional and based on a sound methodology and scientific evidence. Only a coherent policy that takes into account the revised waste framework directive, packaging and packaging waste directive and plastics strategy would be effective.”

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MEP

She adds, “It is relatively straight forward dealing with this issue in Europe. We have the legal structures, the political will and the support of the public. I’m very concerned about the rest of the world, particularly Asia - we must find ways of leveraging Europe’s soft power to influence change and we must do it quickly.”

Greens/EFA group MEP Margrete Auken, raises another issue of concern: that of bioplastic and biodegradability, something that was recently highlighted in a report by the Leibniz- Institute of Freshwater Ecology and Inland Fisheries (IGB).

Incentives to collect marine litter at sea, new EU-wide standards and definitions for biodegradability and compostability and a complete EU ban on oxo-degradable plastic by 2020 are among the proposals set out in the non-binding draft resolution recently adopted by MEPs.

Oxo-degradable plastic does not properly biodegrade, is not compostable and adversely affects how conventional plastic is recycled. Auken says, “The question is whether it can be guaranteed that biodegradable products degrade in marine environments as well [they currently do not] and if we should expect it to be able to in future – is it worth investing in?”

"As awareness of the dangers of plastics pollution continues to rise, one thing is certain: the days of our single-use plastic culture are clearly numbered" Margrete Auken MEP

“Bio-based plastic is interesting as well. In my view, plastic is not necessarily bad, but single-use plastic is bad. Many products are better made of plastic, for instance in the automotive sector. But almost all plastic is made of fossil resources, a lot from fracking as well.”

"Bioplastic holds great potential for plastic to go fossil free but then of course the feedstock has to be carefully managed and regulated so not to compete with food resources." It is indeed a “tricky question” but as awareness of the dangers of plastics pollution continues to rise, one thing is certain: the days of our single-use plastic culture are clearly numbered."

MEPs in the European Parliament’s Environment and Public Health Committee are set to vote on Belgian ALDE group MEP, Frédérique Ries’ draft report on reducing single-use plastics on Wednesday (10 October 2018).

About the author

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