Green politics

Theresa May proposes plastic-free supermarket aisles in green strategy

PM declares war on scourge of plastic waste as she unveils much-heralded 25-year environmental plan

Theresa May has announced a war on plastic waste, with proposed policies including plastics-free aisles in supermarkets and a tax on takeaway containers.

The prime minister set out her ambition to eliminate all avoidable plastic waste within 25 years in a speech on Thursday in which she promised the UK would lead internationally on environmental issues. But campaign groups said the aspirations would need to be backed up by legislation.

They also warned that leaving the EU risked weakening environmental protections, and called for the government to promise it would not water down green standards in exchange for rapid post-Brexit trade deals.

May’s speech, unveiling a much-heralded 25-year plan for the environment in England drawn up by Michael Gove’s environment department with input from pressure groups, focused heavily on plastic waste, which she called “one of the great environmental scourges of our time”.

As reported before the speech, May promised to extend the hugely successful 5p levy on plastic bags to smaller shops, and seek evidence on a possible charge on single-use plastic containers such as takeaway boxes.

Other initiatives include a plan to urge supermarkets to introduce aisles without any plastic packaging, where all food is sold loose, along with new research funding for “plastics innovation” and aid to help developing nations deal with their plastic waste.

May said: “In years to come, I think people will be shocked at how today we allow so much plastic to be produced needlessly.”

Much of this waste ends up in waterways and oceans, May said, with one in three fish caught in the Channel containing pieces of plastic.
She said: “Today I can confirm that the UK will demonstrate global leadership. We must reduce the demand for plastic, reduce the number of plastics in circulation and improve our recycling rates.”

Greenpeace said the announcements on plastics were “a missed opportunity”, with a particular omission being no plans for a deposit return scheme for plastic bottles, which the group said was shown to work well.

Sue Hayman, the shadow environment secretary, said the 5p bag charge was already in place for smaller shops in Scotland and Wales, meaning the government was “simply playing catch-up”.

The overall plan was “a cynical attempt at rebranding the Tories’ image and appears to contain only weak proposals”, she said.

Speaking before the speech on Thursday, Gove said he was “reflecting on” ideas such as a mandatory 25p charge for takeaway coffee cups, but denied that the proposals were limited in terms of immediate action.

“We’re also, I have to say, taking action on a wide variety of ideas already,” he told BBC Radio 4’s Today programme. “No one could say that during the period that I’ve been at the environment department that we have been sloths or slouches. We have been taking action in a wide variety of areas in order to make sure that we enhance our environment.”

He added that Brexit would not result in a reduction in environmental protection: “I’ve already said that we want to set the global gold standard when it comes to the environment, and for animal welfare.”

The wider 25-year plan, with the stated aim of ensuring the current generation is the first to leave the natural world in a better state than it was before, was published on Thursday.

Environmental groups were shown the plan before the speech, and it is understood some felt it remained vague in sections. For example there is a chapter on holding the government to account on its green record, but it is not clear how this will happen.

It is also understood that one section of the plan, on how to make planning and development more environmentally friendly and protect the green belt, remained blank in the copies, possibly because it had not been finalised.

The chief executive of Friends of the Earth, Craig Bennett, said the government’s record on green issues such as air quality and fracking meant he was sceptical about its future ambitions.

“It’s easy to make lots of commitments about things that will be done when you’re no longer in office,” he said. “And the point is, if you look at the government’s performance on some key issues over the last year, there’s some real reasons to be concerned.”

Ben Stafford, the campaigns director of the conservation group WWF, said: “We would say that you need more comprehensive and ambitious legislation with far-reaching targets if you’re going to get into a position where you’re actually improving the environment in the longer term. It’s a very good question as to whether they’ve got the commitment to do that.”

It was vital that Brexit did not lead to any deterioration in standards, he added. “We would expect that future trade policies need to have the environment at their heart. These should be embedding high environmental standards and not trading them off for any sort of competitive advantage.”

In her speech, May announced a plan to use the Commonwealth heads of government summit in April to push for a charter across member states to reduce the amount of plastic waste in oceans.

Stafford said that with the UK a “relatively small contributor” to plastic waste by global standards compared with the likes of India and Sri Lanka, this sort of action in the wake of Brexit was likely to be crucial.

“We and others have welcomed the statements Michael Gove has made as environment secretary, but the real test will come in what we hear tomorrow, and the sense of what kind of leadership the UK is going to give on the world stage and through trade policy,” he said.