EU declares war on plastic waste

Brussels targets single-use plastics in an urgent clean-up plan that aims to make all packaging reusable or recyclable by 2030

The EU is waging war against plastic waste as part of an urgent plan to clean up Europe’s act and ensure that every piece of packaging on the continent is reusable or recyclable by 2030.

Following China’s decision to ban imports of foreign recyclable material, Brussels on Tuesday launched a plastics strategy designed to change minds in Europe, potentially tax damaging behaviour, and modernise plastics production and collection by investing €530m (£310m) in research.

Speaking to the Guardian and four other European newspapers, the vice-president of the commission, Frans Timmermans, said Brussels’ priority was to clamp down on “single-use plastics that take five seconds to produce, you use it for five minutes and it takes 500 years to break down again”.

In the EU’s sights, Timmermans said, were throw-away items such as drinking straws, “lively coloured” bottles that do not degrade, coffee cups, lids and stirrers, cutlery and takeaway packaging.

The former Dutch diplomat told the Guardian: “If we don’t do anything about this, 50 years down the road we will have more plastic than fish in the oceans … we have all the seen the images, whether you watch [the BBC’s] Blue Planet, whether you watch the beaches in Asian countries after storms.

“If children knew what the effects are of using single-use plastic straws for drinking sodas, or whatever, they might reconsider and use paper straws or no straws at all.

“We are going to choke on plastic if we don’t do anything about this. How many millions of straws do we use every day across Europe? I would have people not use plastic straws any more. It only took me once to explain to my children. And now … they go looking for paper straws, or don’t use straws at all. It is an issue of mentality.”

He added: “[One] of the challenges we face is to explain to consumers that arguably some of the options in terms of the colour of bottles you can buy will be more limited than before. But I am sure that if people understand that you can’t buy that lively green bottle, it will have a different colour, but it can be recycled, people will buy into this.”
As part of its strategy, the EU will carry out an impact assessment on a variety of ways to tax the use of single use plastics, although details on potential models were notably lacking from the published strategy documents.

Last week, the budget commissioner, Günther Oettinger, claimed that a levy on plastics could be one way in which Brussels could fill the £13bn hole in its budget left by the UK’s withdrawal from the EU.

"Let’s study this,” Timmermans said. “In a perfect world the revenues of this tax will decrease very rapidly, we have to check in an impact assessment whether this is a sustainable form of income also for the EU’s finances. I think there is a lot of support out there.”

The EU wants 55% of all plastic to be recycled by 2030 and for member states to reduce the use of bags per person from 50 a year to 40 by 2026.

An additional €1.0bn is being made available on top of current spending to research better designs, durability and recyclability and EU member states will be put under an obligation to “monitor and reduce their marine litter”.

The commission said it will promote easy access to tap water on the streets of Europe to reduce demand for bottled water, and they will provide member states with additional guidance on how to improve the sorting and collection of recyclable plastic by consumers.

The EU’s executive is also to propose new clearer labelling for plastic packaging so consumers are clear about their recyclability, and there are plans to ban the addition of microplastics to cosmetics and personal care products, a move that has already been taken by the UK government.

New port reception facilities will seek to streamline waste management to ensure less gets dumped in the oceans under a directive already published.

“More and more it is becoming a health problem because it is degrading, going to little chips, fish are eating it and it is coming back to our dinner table,” said European Commission vice president Jyrki Katainen on Tuesday.

While the EU’s initiative was thick on pledges, and short on detail on how to force member states to act, Timmermans insisted the bloc was serious about the challenge facing them.

Every year, Europeans generate 25m tonnes of plastic waste, but less than 30% is collected for recycling. Across the world, plastics make up 85% of beach litter.
Timmermans praised Theresa May for her recent strategy on plastics, despite criticism elsewhere that it lacked teeth. He noted, however, that charges on plastic bags, while “presented as a national measure” were “based on a European directive”. A spokesman for the Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs responded that the UK had proposed the charges on bags before a EU directive had been proposed.

Catherine Bearder, a Liberal Democrat member of the environment committee, said: “The EU strategy is far from perfect, but it’s better than what the UK government is offering. Theresa May would have you think she is the fairy godmother of plastics - but she isn’t. I will be long dead before the end of Mrs May’s strategy. I hope the oceans won’t be too.”

Timmermans nevertheless said he believed that the UK’s attitude on plastic was ahead of many member states, and that he was confident that the UK would not undercut any Brussels initiatives after Brexit.

He said: “If you saw the impact that Blue Planet had on the public opinion in the United Kingdom, immediately leading to a reaction by the British government, I think this can happen in most of our member states.

He said: “If you saw the impact that Blue Planet had on the public opinion in the United Kingdom, immediately leading to a reaction by the British government, I think this can happen in most of our member states.

“It’s urgent because of the change in the Chinese position. We can’t export these plastics any more to China. The knee-jerk reaction is that we will have to burn or bury it here. Let’s use this opportunity to show we can also recycle it here.”

Topics
Plastics
Waste / Plastic bags / Europe / Recycling / Ethical and green living / news