



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

PRESS RELEASE

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Environment: Commission proposes to reduce the use of plastic bags

Today the European Commission adopted a proposal that requires Member States to reduce their use of lightweight plastic carrier bags. Member States can choose the measures they find most appropriate, including charges, national reduction targets or a ban under certain conditions. Lightweight plastic bags are often used only once, but can persist in the environment for hundreds of years, often as harmful microscopic particles that are known to be dangerous to marine life in particular.

Environment Commissioner Janez Potočnik said: "We're taking action to solve a very serious and highly visible environmental problem. Every year, more than 8 billion plastic bags end up as litter in Europe, causing enormous environmental damage. Some Member States have already achieved great results in terms of reducing their use of plastic bags. If others followed suit we could reduce today's overall consumption in the European Union by as much as 80%."

Technically, the proposal amends the [Packaging and Packaging Waste Directive](#) with two main elements. First, Member States are required to adopt measures to reduce the consumption of plastic carrier bags with a thickness below 50 microns, as these are less frequently reused than thicker ones, and often end up as litter. Second, these measures may include the use of economic instruments, such as charges, national reduction targets, and marketing restrictions (subject to the internal market rules of the [Treaty on the Functioning of the EU](#)). The high reduction rates achieved in some EU Member States, through the introduction of charges and other measures, show that results can be achieved through effective action.

The proposal follows on from measures taken by individual Member States and from [calls by EU Environment Ministers](#) on the Commission to assess the scope for action at EU level. It comes after extensive [public consultations](#) that found broad support for an EU-wide initiative in this area.

Background

The properties that make plastic bags commercially successful – low weight and resistance to degradation – have also contributed to their proliferation in the environment. They escape waste management streams and accumulate in our environment, especially in the form of marine litter. Once discarded, plastic carrier bags can last for hundreds of years. Marine littering is increasingly recognised to be a major global challenge posing a threat to marine eco-systems and animals such as fish and birds. There is also evidence indicating large accumulation of litter in European seas.

In 2010, an estimated 98.6 billion plastic carrier bags were placed on the EU market, which amounts to every EU citizen using 198 plastic carrier bags per year. Out of these almost 100 billion bags, the vast majority are lightweight bags, which are less frequently re-used than thicker ones. Consumption figures vary greatly between Member States, with annual use per capita of lightweight plastic carrier bags ranging between an estimated 4 bags in Denmark and Finland and 466 bags in Poland, Portugal and Slovakia.

For more information:

Link to the draft proposal and to the study (with the figures for MS, as mentioned above):

http://ec.europa.eu/environment/waste/packaging/legis.htm#plastic_bags

See also:

Q&A [MEMO/13/945](#)

http://ec.europa.eu/environment/waste/plastic_waste.htm

<http://ec.europa.eu/environment/waste/index.htm>

Results of the public consultation:

<http://ec.europa.eu/environment/waste/packaging/events.htm>

Audio visual material (VNR) available at tvlink.org

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