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## PlasticsEurope's Views on the Marine Litter Challenge

It is becoming increasingly clear that our maritime environment is under considerable pressure from the activities of man - be it over-fishing, mineral exploitation, pollution and littering. Left unresolved, this situation will only get worse as the human population continues to expand and demand ever increasing resources.

Over recent years we have all seen the images of large amounts of debris washed up on beaches around the world or floating in the sea. We have also been exposed to distressing pictures of marine animals such as turtles and albatrosses exposed to the effects of waste, much of it apparently plastic. As a result of this media exposure many people are rightly asking what is really happening, how big a problem is it and what can be done to stop it?

### A complex issue

We can probably all agree that there is a real problem, but where do we start to address it?

Marine litter is a hugely complex, multi-faceted and increasingly serious problem. However, the simple fact is that waste- (plastics or otherwise) does not belong in the sea. Litter is primarily a result of human neglect and poor waste management and if we all acted responsibly there would be no reason for the large majority of it to be there.

Statements like this are easy to make but delivering on such a vision is much harder. It is a fundamental and urgent challenge for our global society. As an active part of this global community, the plastics industry is as keen as any to help resolve the issue of marine litter and start making progress towards a day when it is no longer an issue.

There is much to be done.

### Making a start

Due to the fact that it floats, plastic garbage is highly visible and is often seen as the primary problem. In reality, there are many forms of heavier materials that are routinely discharged, sinking straight down to the seabed and out-of-sight. But this does not mean they have magically gone away. Plastic garbage is therefore, simply the visible evidence of a much wider malaise.

Therefore the plastics industry recognises that it must help lead the search for joined-up solutions, that will help achieve less waste and in particular plastics in the marine environment and do so quickly.

### Industry action

Progress has been made by the industry. Under producer responsibility programmes, the plastics industry has developed Plastic Recovery Schemes over the last twenty years, aimed at taking waste out of the environment before it has a chance to reach the sea.

There have been other initiatives too such as Operation Clean Sweep, a best practice code to ensure that industry members prevent the loss of plastic pellets into the sea during transportation or down factory drains (that can also find their way to the sea).

Such initiatives can and do make a real difference but the industry acknowledges there are not enough initiatives to stem an increasing wasteful trend, as plastic consumption increases world wide. As things stand a proportion will continue to find its way into the marine environment, unless collectively we start to take action.

### Marine litter is a global problem

Marine litter is often referred to as being both a global phenomenon and a global problem. It does not respect national boundaries or territorial claims and often as not the garbage produced in one country can

end up somewhere completely different. Indeed, floating garbage can be found in some of the most remote places known to man, sometimes in high densities, as a result of currents and tides. This means that global solutions are needed such as those coordinated and advocated by the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP). But such agreements take a long time to create and even longer to action effectively. We also need to act closer to home.

## But what can be done?

### European Union and National Governments to:

- Create a coherent marine litter strategy with one lead body to drive and implement it
- Work to ensure statutory enforcement of waste reduction measures in particular under OSPAR and MARPOL conventions
- Invest in enforcement of domestic legislation including higher penalties for littering, especially on beaches and from vessels
- Extend port waste reception facilities

### Business and industry to:

- Be involved as a contributor to solutions to urgently reduce the impact of the issue on the environment
- Improve water treatment storage capacity and reduce the discharge of untreated sewage
- Tighten packing, transport and shipping procedures to reduce the loss of plastics pellets to the marine environment
- Investigate feasibility and methods of capturing floating garbage and to potentially remove waste from the oceans where it has accumulated
- To support improvement of knowledge of the the long-term impacts of residual plastic material in the marine environment

### The general public to:

- Support clean up schemes to remove garbage from the environment before it reaches the sea
- Take responsibility for all garbage at all times and in every environment, and refuse flushing plastic products as a way of disposal

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## The marine litter challenge

If society is to start to reduce the amounts of waste and in particular plastic waste in the marine environment, then it needs to start to work together in pursuit of a common goal. That said there are a number of particular challenges that can best be addressed by certain groups.

### The challenge for the plastics industry

- Increase the recycling and recovery rate of plastics so that they come out of the waste stream
- The industry must ensure that there is a high level of awareness across the supply chain about the need to tighten up waste process and protocols to ensure proper management of the product takes place at every stage, including transportation
- Work in even closer co operation with all parties including governments, customers, and NGOs to set the tackling of marine debris as a key objective

### The challenge for the UN Environment Program

- Develop internationally harmonised methods for assessment of marine litter quantities and their changes over time

- Engage with nations that have difficulties implementing sound waste management infrastructure
- Support investigation of feasibility and methods to capture floating garbage from the oceans and to potentially remove waste from the oceans where it has accumulated

## **The challenge for National Governments**

- The creation and enforcement of legislation that ensures better management of waste both on land and at sea is essential if progress is to be made. There needs to be a higher penalty for poor waste management that allows any material to find its way to the sea
- Governments need to coordinate measures taken against marine litter and ensure there is a coherent and practical strategy in place to achieve measurable results
- This clearly needs to be linked to an overall waste strategy that limits the role of land filling (which is probably where much of plastics waste in marine litter originates) and focuses on the four R's (reuse, reduce, recycle, recover)
- A continuous commitment to public education is required to achieve behavioural change on littering, but this needs to extend to businesses as well as to consumers

## **The challenge for Regional Governments**

- Some beaches have a lot less waste compared to others and although there are many reasons for this, variable standards of waste management on the beaches themselves will play an important part
- Councils need to consider the effectiveness of their litter strategy, by focusing on simple concerns such as the number and location of waste bins on a given beach and how many times they are emptied
- Continuously improve waste reception facilities and practices in all ports

## **The challenge for the public**

- Plastics make life easier and better but we all need to be responsible for their ensured disposal
- To understand that our individual actions can directly increase or decrease the size of the problem
- To create a culture that takes a zero tolerance view of public littering

Following associations worldwide support the present document:

- ✓ ACC – American Chemical Council, Plastics Division ([www.plastics.org](http://www.plastics.org))
- ✓ AICM – Association of International Chemical Manufacturers – China
- ✓ EPIC – Environment and Plastics Industry Council – Canada (<http://www.plastics.ca/>)
- ✓ MPMA – Malaysian Plastics Manufacturers Association
- ✓ PACIA – Plastics and Chemicals Industries Association – Australia (<http://www.pacia.org.au/>)
- ✓ PFSA – Plastics Federation of South Africa
- ✓ Plastivida Argentina (<http://www.plastivida.com.ar/>)
- ✓ Plastivida Brasil (<http://www.plastivida.org.br/>)

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PlasticsEurope is one of the leading European trade associations with centres in Brussels, Frankfurt, London, Madrid, Milan and Paris. We are networking with European and national plastics associations and have more than 100 member companies, producing over 90% of all polymers across the EU27 member states plus Norway, Switzerland, Croatia and Turkey. The European plastics industry makes a significant contribution to the welfare in Europe by enabling innovation, creating quality of life for citizens and facilitating resource efficiency and climate protection. More than 1.6 million people are working in about 50.000 companies (mainly small and medium sized companies in the converting sector) to create a turnover in excess of 300 billion € per year. The plastics industry includes polymer producers - represented by PlasticsEurope, converters - represented by EuPC and machinery manufacturers - represented by EUROMAP.