

Parliamentary Briefing

Stemming the Plastic Tide

For the Scottish Government debate, Wednesday 7 February 2018

Plastics pollution has been making headlines for some months, as programmes like BBC's Blue Planet and new research draws attention to the horrifying extent of the problem. The sheer volume of plastics pollution is highlighted by the finding of the Ellen MacArthur Foundation that there will be more plastics than fish in the sea by 2050¹.

Meanwhile, the impacts of plastic pollution range from the immediate, such as rubbish on our beaches and direct harm to birds and other wildlife, to the far reaching and lesser understood long-term impacts on habitats, food-chains and human health.

In this context, the Scottish Government is to be congratulated for its recent commitments including:

- The commitment to introduce a deposit and return scheme for bottles and cans.
- A ban on plastic cotton buds.
- The phase out of non-recyclable plastics by 2030 in line with the EU.
- Setting up an expert panel to advise on the use of levies to change consumer behavior.

We also note the inspiring recent initiative taken by the community in Ullapool to ban plastic straws, and welcome Asda, the Scottish Parliament, ScotRail Alliance, Glasgow City Council and CalMac following suit.

Focus on reduction

The increase in single use plastics has coincided with the development of a damaging mind-set of 'take-make-dispose' and a culture of hyper-consumerism, impacting people and environments worldwide – from resource extraction, to manufacturing and disposal. As Europeans, we consume far more than our fair share of the Earth's resources, far overstepping planetary boundaries.

While consumer behaviour is one important aspect of tackling the problem of plastics pollution, it is critical that the Scottish Government takes action to address the problem at source by restricting the sale and manufacture of single-use plastics. Action to tackle plastics pollution must be as part of the overall shift to a Circular Economy, and crucially, be informed by the waste hierarchy, with the focus on reduction ahead of reuse and recycling.

No false solutions

Where reduction is impossible and substitution is necessary, safeguards must be put into place to ensure that adverse knock on consequences are minimised. For example, substituting bioplastics could exert serious pressure on land use, including loss of habitats, land degradation, competition for food production and related land conflicts.

An enormous estimated area of 1.4 million hectares – more than the size of Belgium, the Netherlands and Denmark combined – could be being used for bioplastic feedstock by 2019, most of it in Asia². Further, there are challenges with recycling and the biodegradability of some bioplastics, including in relation to consumer understanding and behavior.

Therefore, planetary limits, ethical sourcing, resource efficiency and the waste hierarchy must inform the role of bioplastics in reducing plastic pollution and moving to a Circular Economy.

No fracking for packing

Plastics pollution is all too often simply one end of a long, environmentally damaging journey from resource extraction to litter. In the EU, 90% of plastics are produced with feedstock derived from fossil fuels, and the refining and manufacture of those feedstocks is highly energy intensive and therefore climate polluting.

Grangemouth operator INEOS is the largest producer of plastic in UK and the EU, and one of the largest in the world. In 2016 it produced 10 million tonnes of plastic worldwide, which is the equivalent of approximately twice the weight of the entire UK human population. INEOS is the UK's number two producer of polyethylene, which is mainly used for single use plastics such as plastic bags, film for packing and wrapping, food containers, milk and juice bottles, and bottle tops³.

INEOS is currently importing large volumes of fracked ethane from the US to feed its gas cracker at Grangemouth, while at the same time attempting to push forward fracking plans in England where it has 1.2 million acres of land under licence. The company's fracking plans are met with strong opposition from impacted communities on both sides of the Atlantic.

The Scottish Government – backed by Labour, Greens and Liberal Democrats in Holyrood – banned fracking in Scotland in October last year because of the unacceptable impacts on public health, climate change and the environment more broadly, a ban which INEOS is currently attempting to challenge in the Court of Session.

INEOS's plans to expand the capacity of its plastics processing units at Grangemouth⁴ are completely out of step with the shift to a low-carbon, circular economy and the current focus on reducing plastic waste. Scottish Government must work with the industry to plan its transition away from high-carbon polluting plastics to a low-carbon model with a focus on plastics recycling.

¹ Ellen MacArthur Foundation, *The New Plastics Economy: Rethinking the future of plastics*, January 2016. <https://www.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/publications/the-new-plastics-economy-rethinking-the-future-of-plastics>

² Friends of the Earth Europe et al, *Bioplastics in a Circular Economy: The need to focus on waste reduction and prevention to avoid false solutions*, January 2017. http://ecostandard.org/wp-content/uploads/Joint-position-paper_Bioplastics-in-a-Circular-Economy_Jan-2017.pdf

³ Friends of the Earth England Wales and Northern Ireland, *Briefing: Ineos, fracking and plastics*, September 2017. <https://friendsoftheearth.uk/sites/default/files/downloads/briefing-ineos-fracking-plastic-104307.pdf>

⁴ INEOS press release, *INEOS Plans Massive European Expansion Programme*, 12 June 2017. <https://www.ineos.com/news/ineos-group/ineos-plans-massive-european-expansion-programme/>