European strategy on plastic waste in the environment

2013/2113(INI) - 14/01/2014 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament adopted a resolution on a European strategy on plastic waste in the environment. It welcomed the Commission's Green Paper, noting that plastic materials were accumulating in large quantities (a total of 80 MT is estimated to be floating in the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans) and persisted in the environment for hundreds of years, killing marine life, provoking toxic reactions and releasing endocrine disrupters. Members noted that **poor implementation and enforcement of EU waste legislation by Member States**, lack of relevant targets and price mechanisms, insufficient internal demand for recycled materials, **illegal dumping, illegal exports** and improper storage, had led to significant global damage to human health and the environment, and to increased exports of waste, **resulting in loss of materials and employment in the EU.** Parliament pointed out that points out that full implementation of EU waste legislation could save EUR 72 billion a year, increase the annual turnover of the EU waste management and recycling sector by EUR 42 billion, and create over 400 000 jobs by 2020.

Given that some 40 % of plastic waste derives from packaging and mostly from single-use products, it was necessary to revise the Packaging Directive. Furthermore, Members noted that the economic potential for recycling of plastic waste was currently much higher than the 33 % achieved with regard to plastic packaging waste and the 25 % achieved with regard to total plastic waste.

Parliament proposed that the **EU legislation on plastic waste should aim first at its reduction, and should therefore be revised** in order to include:

- specific binding targets for collection, sorting (which could reach the ambitious level of 80 %) and recycling of the various plastic waste streams and mandatory criteria for recyclability (clarifying the distinctions between mechanical/organic recycling and recovery/incineration). **The aim should be a progressive and ambitious target for recycled plastic free from hazardous additives that are no longer allowed to be used in new products, to be reached by 2020**;

- the **EU-wide harmonisation of criteria** for collection, sorting and general waste management, with a view to creating a level playing field in accordance with the waste hierarchy, including the removal of technical, regulatory, administrative and financial barriers to recycling;

- **specific labelling of materials** in order to inform consumers concerning mechanical or organic recyclability of products, together with indications for consumers on how to increase sorting and recycling; and

- criteria for the **replacement of single-use and short-lived plastic products** by reusable and more durable materials.

Members also called on the Commission to make proposals by 2014 **to phase out the landfilling of recyclable and recoverable waste by 2020,** without, however, incentivising as a result the energy recovery option over recycling, and ensuring that environmental efficiency criteria are applied to all options. Plastic waste should be used for **energy recovery only in cases where all other possibilities had been exhausted** and where the technology used included the requisite purification systems for preventing environmental damage and harm to human health.

Alongside the targets mentioned above for recycling, it was essential to introduce appropriate measures **discouraging incineration** of recyclable, compostable and biodegradable plastics, in order to optimise the life-cycle of each plastic type while respecting the waste hierarchy. Members asked the Commission to propose measures relating to design that improve the overall environmental impact of products. Furthermore, Parliament considered that:

- the **most dangerous plastics** (such as micro- and oxo-biodegradable plastics) and those which contain **heavy metals** should be **phased out of the market or banned outright, as soon as possible before 2020** to in order develop a market for reused and recycled materials, and **separate collection** of these should be immediately implemented;

- as demanded by a majority of European citizens and consumers, the use of single-use, non-recyclable, non-biodegradable and non-compostable **plastic bags should be radically reduced and where possible phased out.**

Members called for more **public and private investment in research and technologies** aimed at obtaining more sustainable plastics and for enhanced plastic biodegradation processes, waste sorting methods, processing and mechanical recycling, recovery of plastics from oceans, eco-design and smart packaging. **Horizon 2020** could offer opportunities to respond to this important societal need and advantages include the creation of new economic activities.

Parliament also called for the following:

- more **public procurement tenders**, including those of the European institutions, to include clear demands as regards the recycling of plastic waste as well as favouring the use of recycled plastic where possible;

- bolder steps to **tackle illegal exports and dumping of plastic waste,** including stricter enforcement of EU shipment regulations, as well as stricter inspection schemes at ports and at all waste treatment facilities, targeting suspected illegal transfers;

- the **financing of waste recycling infrastructure to take priority over the financing of waste dumping** and incineration, with greater efforts incentivise citizens and businesses to adopt a circular economy concept with regard to plastic waste;

- concrete actions and campaigns such as the establishment of a **European Day for plastic waste**, when citizens could return any volume of plastic waste to predetermined points;

- stepping up **dialogue with third countries**, such as those with Black Sea territorial waters, in order to address the problem of marine plastic litter more effectively;

- local and regional authorities to coordinate public service provisions with environmental targets and objectives in order to achieve multiple objectives and stimulate green jobs in the process.

Lastly, Parliament regarded identifying the future needs of the labour market as a priority, and emphasised that appropriate levels of training and skills were needed for eco-innovations to flourish and for EU waste legislation to be correctly implemented. It recommended that the Member States **integrate the circular economy model in their professional training schemes,** and recalled that, by promoting vocational training and work-based learning, the European Social Fund could help satisfy the demand for sustainable quality jobs in less resource-intensive industries, in line with the Social Investment Package presented by the Commission in February 2013.