Packaging and packaging waste: reduction of the consumption of lightweight plastic carrier bags

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The Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety adopted the report by Margrete AUKEN (Greens/EFA, DK) on the proposal for a directive of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Directive 94/62/EC on packaging and packaging waste to reduce the consumption of lightweight plastic carrier bags.

The committee recommended that Parliament's position adopted at first reading following the ordinary legislative procedure should amend the Commission proposal as follows:

Introducing a European reduction target on plastic bags: according to Members, lightweight plastic carrier bags with a thickness below 50 microns, which represent the vast majority of the total number of plastic carrier bags consumed in the Union, are less reusable than thicker plastic carrier bags, thus become waste more quickly, are more prone to littering and, due to their light weight, more likely to end up scattered through the environment, both on land and in freshwater and marine-ecosystem. Current recycling rates are very low even though plastic carrier bags are recyclable.

Members proposed that Member States should take measures to achieve a sustained reduction in the consumption of lightweight plastic carrier bags on their territory of at least **50%** within three years and **80%** within five years of the entry into force of the Directive, as compared to the average consumption in the Union in 2010, respectively.

Paying for plastic carrier bags: under the new Directive, Member States should take measures to ensure that economic operators selling food **do not provide plastic carrier bags free of charge**, except for very lightweight plastic carrier bags, or alternatives to such very lightweight plastic carrier bags.

In addition, Member States encourage economic operators selling **non-food items** to charge for plastic carrier bags to an extent that is effective and proportionate so as to achieve the reduction targets. Member States with separate collection of bio-waste should be allowed to reduce the price of biodegradable and compostable lightweight plastic carrier bags.

Member States should take measures to ensure that very lightweight plastic carrier bags used to wrap dry loose, unpackaged foods such as fruits, vegetables and confectionery are replaced progressively by carrier bags that are made of recycled paper, or by very lightweight plastic carrier bags that are biodegradable and compostable. They should achieve a replacement rate of 50% by three years and of 100% by five years after the entry into force of this Directive.

Consumers should be allowed by retailers to refuse and to leave at the point of sale any packaging they consider superfluous, in particular as regard to carrier bags. Retailers should ensure that such packaging is either reused or recycled.

Phasing out "oxo-biodegradable" plastics: the report stressed that "Oxo-biodegradable" plastics do not biodegrade in the natural environment, but only fragment into secondary microplastics. It is thus misleading to refer to such materials as "biodegradable".

Fragmentation converts visible littering into invisible littering. This solution enhances pollution of the environment by plastic materials. “Oxo-biodegradable” plastics should therefore not be used as a packaging material.

Substituting hazardous substances for packaging as a whole: in order to reduce the exposure of European citizens to dangerous substances and to avoid that such substances enter the environment during the waste phase, Members proposed that packaging as a whole should no longer contain substances that are carcinogenic, mutagenic or toxic to reproduction or that are endocrine disrupters.