# EU ban on microplastics stubs out cigarette butt pollution

Since May 2018, the EU has been trying to tackle the top 10 types of litter found on Europe's beaches – the second most common being cigarette butts. As part of the European Strategy for Plastics in a Circular Economy, it introduced a major directive aiming to phase out unnecessary single-use plastics. This directive takes aim at tobacco via the environmental damage caused by cigarette butts, 4.5 trillion of which are thrown away each year worldwide. The EU's action is just one good example highlighted on World No Tobacco Day 2022, which this year is focusing on the impact of tobacco on our planet's scarce resources and fragile ecosystems.

We all know tobacco is harmful. The science is unequivocal on the impacts of smoking to human health. But how bad is tobacco for the environment? This year's World No Tobacco Day exposes how tobacco is poisoning the planet as well as people. Through the entirety of its life cycle, tobacco products cause dangerous environmental impacts. These range from crop-production to post-consumer waste, deforestation, desertification, greenhouse gas emissions and plastic pollution. As highlighted in the EU's single-use plastic directive, cigarette butts also cause significant harm to the natural environment. They can be particularly damaging on beaches and in waterways: aside from plastic pollution, the chemicals leaching from cigarette butts can be lethal to marine and freshwater fish species.

Cornel Radu-Loghin is Secretary General of the European Network for Smoking and Tobacco Prevention (ENSP). He explains how the single-use plastic directive has a direct relevance to tobacco control. "There are now marking and labelling requirements as well as awareness raising measures. The directive also imposes the implementation of extended producer responsibility schemes by 5 January 2023, under which the producers of these products would have to cover at least the costs of the awareness raising measures as

well as the cost of clean-up, collection, transport and treatment of waste."

The tobacco industry is ultimately responsible for the environmental destruction caused by the production of cigarettes. An estimated 1.5 billion hectares of mainly tropical forest have been lost since the 1970s due to tobacco. It also has a deep impact on soil quality and water resources. Nonetheless, it is working hard to greenwash its reputation as sustainable and eco-friendly; one way is to promote products as 'natural' or 'organic' and therefore less harmful to the consumer. However, tobacco products and production are highly damaging to people and the planet.

The tobacco industry should also be held to account for tobacco waste and damages following production. Through a range of methods, the tobacco industry is trying to pin the responsibility of tobacco waste onto the consumer, such as through the sponsorship and encouragement of portable ashtrays. The tobacco industry should pay for the damage caused and be held to account for the environmental impact of its products all the way through the supply chain.

There are many ways to address the environmental harms of the tobacco industry. These include interventions, such as introducing extended producer responsibility schemes, which puts the burden of clean-up on the producer, not the consumer. Environmental taxes should also be placed on the tobacco industry. Ultimately, prevention is a great cure: eradication of tobacco waste requires drastic cuts in tobacco consumption itself. Full implementation of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) therefore makes strides ahead towards an entirely tobacco-free future, including tobacco waste.

"All EU Member States must take into account the WHO FCTC provisions, in particular Article 5.3, when implementing the single-use plastic directive," says Cornel Radu-Loghin. "If not, the tobacco industry will succeed and obtain a role in public decision-making through this environmental whitewashing enterprise."

Organizations, such as the ENSP, play a crucial watchdog role over this process. "ENSP and other tobacco control organizations at the European and national levels will act to critically monitor the activities of governments, industry and other organizations," says Cornel. "We will alert the public when we detect actions that go against the public

interest."

On World No Tobacco Day, Cornel has a reminder for policy-makers across the WHO European Region. "Tobacco doesn't just negatively impact the health of individuals; it also endangers the health of the environment. When e-cigarette and cigarette waste isn't disposed of properly, it makes its way into the environment where it ends up polluting water, air and land with toxic chemicals, heavy metals and residual nicotine."

He calls for action, citing Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, "If tobacco was a virus, it would long ago have been called a pandemic, and the world would marshal every resource to stop it. But instead, it's a multi-billion-dollar business that profits from death and disease, imposes huge costs on health systems, and takes a massive economic toll in lost productivity."

*Press release distributed by Wire Association on behalf of World Health Organization, on May 31, 2022. For more information subscribe and* [follow](#) *us.*

---

# Media Assets

### Embedded Media

Visit the [online press release](#) to interact with the embedded media.

https://wireassociation.eu/newsroom/world-health-organization/releases/en/eu-ban-on-microplastics-stubs-out-cigarette-butt-pollution-329

---

# World Health Organization

**Newsroom:** [https://wireassociation.eu/newsroom/world-health-organization](https://wireassociation.eu/newsroom/world-health-organization)
**Website:** https://www.euro.who.int/en/home

**Primary Email:** eupress@who.int

## Social Media

Youtube - https://www.youtube.com/whoeuro
Twitter - https://twitter.com/WHO_Europe
Facebook - https://www.facebook.com/WHOEurope