

The European Commission is gearing up to reveal how it plans to tackle single-use plastics as part of the much vaunted Plastics Strategy. But an initial draft of the legislation has already received mixed reviews.

Commission HQ is slated to present the single-use plastics proposal before the end of the month but a first draft of what is considered one of the jewels in the Plastics Strategy crown has already made its way out of the Berlaymont corridors.

The proposal names and shames a number of specific items that would be targeted by the legislation, including cotton-bud sticks, cutlery, plates, straws and beverage stirrers, as well as plastic sticks used for balloons.

When Commissioners Frans Timmermans and Jyrki Katainen presented the Plastics Strategy in January, the EU executive pledged to tackle the most frequently littered products, especially those that are often found on beaches.

While certain products named in the draft would be excluded from the EU market, other items would be subject to measures like stricter labelling and design requirements, and member states would be obligated to “achieve a significant reduction” in consumption of things like cups.

Labelling requirements are intended to allow consumers to make better choices at supermarket checkouts and corner shops, as the Commission’s proposal would see the negative environmental aspects of products displayed clearly on packaging.

But the wording of the as-yet-unreleased draft legislation has been called into question. Campaigner Ariadna Rodrigo, speaking on behalf of the Rethink Plastic alliance, said that a lack of specific targets meant that national capitals could interpret “significant reduction” differently.

However, she did praise the draft as a “good first step”, particularly welcoming the use of different measures for different products. Rodrigo added that civil society will expect the Council and Parliament to improve the draft once it is released.

Not just bans

‘Extended producer responsibility’ also features heavily in the draft, as member states will have to ensure schemes are put in place that force producers to cover the costs of collecting certain items, in a policy decision that is reminiscent of the energy sector’s ‘polluter pays’ principle.

ClientEarth lawyer Tatiana Luján welcomed the Commission’s proposal to shift responsibility to producers but warned lawmakers not to “leave the door open for throwaway items to be replaced by other materials that come with their own problems, like so-called ‘bioplastics’”.

The draft also suggests that single-use beverage containers should be designed so that their lids and caps stay attached to the bottle. Also, the aim is for 90% of single-use plastic bottles to be collected by 2025.

That would mean member states would have to look into separate targets or rely on deposit refund systems. England followed the lead of many other EU countries in March by announcing a deposit return scheme.

Plastics Recyclers Europe welcomed the addition of a collection rate target, pointing out that plastic bottles are one of the most recyclable products yet often become litter due to “badly functioning collection systems”.

But the association was less positive about the Commission’s current position on bio-degradable single-use plastics, warning that there is a lack of “clarity” and that they should not be exempted from forthcoming rules unless “reliable scientific studies” prove otherwise.

Norway leaps ahead

Norway’s capital city, Oslo, beat the EU to the punch last week when Mayor Raymond Johansen announced that it would become the first city in the world to cut out single-use plastics.

“Oslo municipality takes the lead role in reducing the use of unnecessary plastic. We will go through our own purchases to phase out unnecessary single-use plastics in the municipality’s projects, and invite industries and organisations in Oslo to a community effort against plastic pollution,” he told Norwegian media.

But like the EU’s draft proposal, Oslo’s plans have been met with some scepticism.

Conservative lawmaker Eirik Lae Solberg said there should be more ambition and warned that the wording of “unnecessary plastic” was vague.

Zero Waste Europe’s Ferran Rosa warned that the announcement was more of a “marketing action than true systemic change”, adding that “cities should truly prevent single-use plastics by promoting innovative delivery systems based on reusables”.

However, United Nations Environment Assembly chief Erik Solheim, who served as Norway’s environment minister from 2007 to 2012, called the move “great leadership”.

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