

Plastic food packaging may be fuelling, rather than combating, Europe's food waste problem, according to a new study that found both packaging and waste doubled in the EU between 2004 and 2014.

A new study by NGOs Friends of the Earth Europe and Zero Waste Europe published on Tuesday (10 April) has revealed that plastic packaging has not tackled Europe's food waste problem, as the annual output of Europeans now stands at 30kg and 173kg, respectively. One of the main advantages of plastic packaging cited by manufacturers is that it keeps food fresher for longer and, as such, should reduce food waste.

But the study's findings showed that food waste and packaging have grown in tandem since the 1950s and that between 2004 and 2014, the former doubled to an estimated 30 million tonnes per year, while the latter increased by between 40 and 50%.

Friends of the Earth Europe's Meadhbh Bolger said that "wrapping, bottling and packing food in plastic doesn't systemically prevent food waste, and sometimes even causes it". She added that it is "a red herring" that just causes pollution.

Plastics are used to cover 37% of the food sold in the EU, making it the most widely-used packaging material. Most of it is used only once and ultimately ends up in landfill sites, being incinerated or polluting waterways.

Eighty-five percent of beach litter around the world is plastic, over half of which is single-use plastics like plastic straws, food containers and cutlery.

In March, EU environment chief Karmenu Vella participated in a beach clean-up on the Belgian coast, where 5.5 tonnes of waste was collected in just one day by volunteers. The most widely found single-use items were plastic bags, balloons and cotton buds.

In an effort to curb the use of throwaway items, the European Commission announced in January that it would present a legislative initiative on banning single-use plastics as part of its Plastics Strategy. A proposal is expected in mid-May.

Wasteful EU

Food waste is also a significant problem and the EU's apparent inaction has been criticised by activists and even the bloc's own auditors, who highlighted in January the Commission's alleged failures in a scathing report.

The EU executive has been urged to tackle the problem with legislation. In March, French politician Arash Derambarsh called on the Commission's food safety boss, Vytenis Andriukaitis, to push for a directive before the 2019 European elections.

Derambarsh is one of the architects behind a French law that obliges supermarkets to donate unsold food to charity or face sizeable fines. A similar initiative is also in place in Italy and Derambarsh would like to see it rolled out EU-wide.

Alternatives?

The food waste study acknowledges that plastic does have a role to play in packaging but that more sustainable alternatives should be used instead. But what are the options?

FEVE, the European Container Glass Federation, thinks that the answer lies in its material of choice: glass. Recycling rates for the material are high, in the EU it is 74% and in some countries like Belgium and Sweden, it is over 95%. Less than a third of plastic waste was recycled in 2014.

At a EURACTIV event on Tuesday (10 April), FEVE's Jean-Paul Judson clarified that the idea is not for glass to replace plastic but to be included to a far greater extent in recycling plans. He added that their aim is "to make this [glass] model the reference".

Plastics and their role in society are increasingly moving into the spotlight since China revealed that it would no longer accept imports of waste. That prompted national capitals and the EU to start thinking in earnest about what to do with its waste.

While the EU has launched the Plastics Strategy as its marquee initiative to tackle the issue, governments like the UK's have decided to launch measures like deposit-return schemes that are intended to boost recycling rates.

Progress?

Industry leaders are starting to get in on the act too. One of the main tent poles of the Plastics Strategy is voluntary commitments by manufacturers and producers, and on Tuesday Swiss food giant Nestle revealed it wants all its packaging recyclable or reusable by 2025.

Nestle is the world's biggest packaged food company and although the 2025 goal undercuts the EU's target of 2030 by five years, activist groups like Greenpeace criticised Nestle's announcement as an exercise in greenwashing due to a lack of quantitative targets.

Nestle sustainability expert Duncan Pollard told reporters during a call that the company would focus on eliminating non-recyclable plastics and promoting easier-to-process materials instead.

Pollard added that something as simple as changing the colour of packaging and shifting to lighter colours would have a positive impact on recycling but warned that it will still heavily rely on local infrastructure to increase rates.

Source: euractiv.com