

General plastic information

- Global production of plastics is now around 265 million tonnes year. This is a growth rate of 4.5%/ yr over the past 20 years (Plastics Europe 2011).
- In 2010 Europe accounted for 57 million tonnes (21.5%) of global consumption with 39% of this plastic being used for packaging. Growth in the production of plastics is likely to continue to rise at present rates of use and consumption.
- Estimates for plastic degradation at sea range from 450 to 1,000 years. However, plastics may never fully degrade; they simply break down into smaller and smaller fragments and ultimately into microscopic plastic pieces or plastic dust.
- There are areas of significant concern over the effects of plastics and their degradation products on wildlife and over the social and economic costs of marine litter which urgently need further research and attention.
- Current research is looking at microplastics, their ability to adsorb toxins from the sea water and to pass these toxins on once ingested. This may imply bioaccumulation up the food chain – ultimately to us as sea food consumers.
- Main problems for wildlife are entanglement in, and ingestion of, marine plastics.
- Despite increasing legislation aimed at preventing the dumping of litter at sea such as the MARPOL Convention and the Port Waste Reception Facilities Regulations, together with increasing public awareness of waste and recycling, quantities of litter on UK beaches have shown no appreciable decrease over the last 18 years. Average litter densities on UK beaches are now around 2,000 litter items/km surveyed.
- (MCS) has co-ordinated a UK-wide beach litter survey and clean up since 1994. Plastic items have always dominated the litter found during Beachwatch surveys and consistently account for over 50% of all litter. The no of items/ km of plastic litter in the same period has increased by over 100% (now ca. 1,200 items/km)
- Most items of sewage related debris (SRD) are now entirely or partially made of plastic, and that polystyrene is also a form of plastic. This means that the percentage of beach litter caused by all plastics is over 60%
- The Secretary for State Caroline Spelman in the Review of Waste Policy in England 2011 recently stated “We are committed to working towards a zero waste economy as part of the transition to a green economy and our commitment to be the greenest government ever”. This zero waste economy must acknowledge and include the marine realm as well as the terrestrial.

Some plastic bag facts

- A total of eight billion 'thin-gauge' bags were issued in the UK in 2011, which represents a 5.4% rise compared with 2010 (7.6 billion).
- In the latest Local Environmental Quality Survey of England, single-use plastic carrier bags were found littered on eight per cent of sites.
- The figures revealed a 7.5% rise in England, an 8.1% rise in Northern Ireland but no significant change in Scotland. However in Wales, where a mandatory 5p charge for single use bags was introduced in October 2011, there was a 22% fall in the number of bags used.
- Between 2010 and 2011 there was an 11% increase in the amount of virgin polymer used in the manufacture of all carrier bags.
- It is estimated that a plastic bag takes between 450 and 1,000 years to degrade. This means that unless they are disposed off properly, they form long-lasting litter.
- Plastic bags are said to be the most common manmade item seen by sailors at sea.
- Plastic bags contribute between 0.1 – 1% of visible litter in the UK;
- Around 2% of litter on UK beaches is plastic bags;
- During the Beachwatch Big Weekend 2011, 5,433 plastic bags were found on 335 beaches around the UK; an average of 38 bags for every kilometre of coastline surveyed.
- During the 2011 International Coastal Clean-up (ICC), which took place in over 60 countries worldwide, 969,244 plastic bags were found, accounting for 9% of all litter found (ICC, 2012)
- In 2010 the ICC reported that 15% of all animals found dead during the survey had been entangled in plastic bags
- The impacts of plastic bags on wildlife include ingestion and entanglement leading to infection, amputation, starvation and death.

The position in the EU

Results of a consultation carried out by the EU last year showed that the majority of respondents were in favour of an outright ban. The European Commission is to publish proposals soon on ways to reduce plastic consumption.

Every year 800,000 tonnes of single-use plastic bags are used in the European Union - the average EU citizen used 191 of them in 2010, the Commission says, and only 6% were recycled. More than four billion bags are thrown away each year.

Shops already charging for bags

- Aldi
- IKEA
- M&S
- B&Q (check)
- WHSmith (check)
- Lidl
- Holland & Barrett (check)

Other countries/areas charging for bags

N.b. some countries have a levy and different criteria for banning plastic bags, others have an outright ban

- San Francisco - first city in United States to ban plastic bags in March 2007
- Bangladesh, (outright ban)
- Ireland,
- Taiwan,
- France, (outright ban 2010)
- West Bengal, (outright ban)
- Tanzania, (outright ban)
- Switzerland,
- Rwanda, (outright ban)
- Denmark,
- Sweden,
- Germany,
- South Africa, (outright ban)
- Italy, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/12/29/us-italy-retail-plasticbags-idUSTRE6BS1ZJ20101229>
- Australia (outright ban in supermarkets 2008)
- India, (outright ban in large area's including Mumbai)
- Somalia, (outright ban)
- Botswana, (outright ban)
- Philippines (outright ban coming soon)
- Uganda (outright ban)
- Kenya (outright ban)
- Japan
- Turkey
- Ethiopia
- Paia, Maui (2008)

Time lines of the plastic bag levies/taxes in the UK and Ireland (As of July 2012)

Ireland

Levy saw a 90% reduction on plastic bag usage

Plastic bag litter reduced from around 5% to 0.22%

Implementation 2002 - 5c
 2007 - 22c

Wales

The first to use the powers contained in the Climate Change Act 2008, to enable the introduction, through regulations, of a charge on single use carrier bags. Retailers encouraged to give the proceeds from the carrier bag charge to environmental projects within Wales.

Consultation – 2009

Implementation - October 2011 - 5p

Northern Ireland

The Single Use Carrier Bags Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 amended the Climate Change Act 2008. The effect of this amendment – specific to Northern Ireland – enabled the Department of the Environment to stipulate that the proceeds of any charge on carrier bags are to be returned to the Department.

The detailed framework for implementation was determined by regulations made under the Climate Change Act 2008.

Consultation July 2011
Implementation April 2013 - 5p
 April 2014 - 10p

Scotland

First attempt in 2005 by Mike Pringle MSP as a private members' Bill 'The Environmental Levy on Plastic Bags (Scotland) Bill' proposing a 10p tax on plastic bags given out by retailers in Scotland. Withdrawn in 2006 as did not get sufficient support.

New consultation ongoing

England

As yet nothing although the Government Review of Waste Policy in England 2011 did state “In the light of the 2011 figures on the use of single use carrier bags in England and the results of the proposed policy in Wales, the Government will decide whether and what further action might be needed” with the delivery timeline given as Summer 2012