

MICROPLASTICS POLLUTION

Measures to reduce its impact on the environment

May 2022



Regulation on Microplastics Pollution

Water Europe Vision

Water Europe has set out a blueprint for a society in which the true value of water is recognised and realised, and all available water sources are managed in such a way that water scarcity and pollution of water are avoided, water and resource loops are largely closed to foster a circular economy and optimal resource efficiency, while the water system is resilient against the impact of climate change events ; and all relevant stakeholders are involved in the governance of our water system.



Multiple Waters



Digital Water



Value in Water

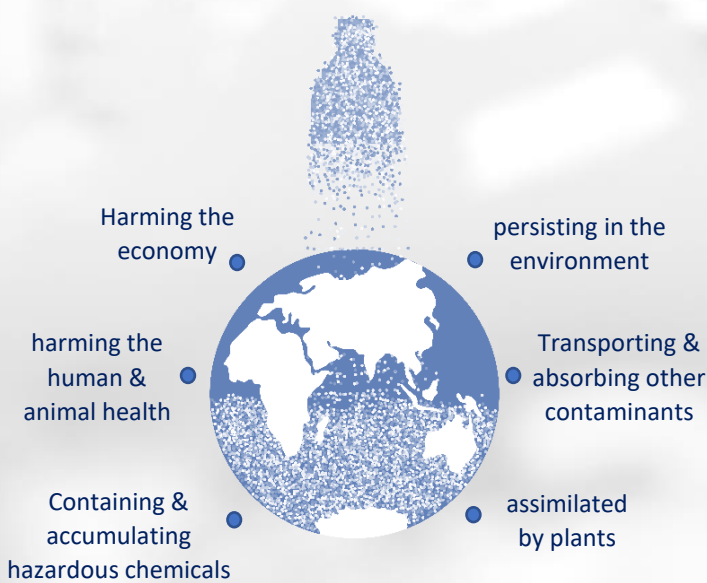


Hybrid Grey-Green Infrastructure

Microplastics management in a Water-Smart Society

Water Europe welcomes the initiative for a regulation on microplastics pollution, which aims to improve the science on the risks and occurrence of microplastics pollutants in the environment and reduce pollution and health risks. Beyond protecting tap water for human consumption, this regulation will also support healthy bathing waters. Therefore, this regulation will buttress a Water-Smart Society in Europe.

The international and European commitments of the European Commission to fight plastics pollution at all stages of its life cycle (cf. speech of Commissioner Sinkevičius, Nairobi, 2 March 2022) will support different EU strategies, such as the Circular Economy Action Plan. Europe must tackle the different concerns of microplastics pollution by establishing an ambitious definition of microplastics, ensuring robust and transparent data based on science and effective water-smart management of plastics.



Concerns of microplastics pollution



I am glad that with EU input the global community today stepped up to fight plastics pollution. We will engage actively in the discussions of a legally binding agreement that looks at all stages of the plastics life cycle from product design to waste.

Commissioner Virginijus Sinkevičius
(during his speech in Nairobi at the United Nations Environment Assembly for a global agreement to fight plastic pollution)



1 A clear European-wide definition

The regulation has to give a concrete European-wide definition of microplastics, based on science and compatible with the objective to fight microplastics pollution. There is a consensus to consider microplastics as all plastic particles smaller than 5 mm^1 . This definition should not allow any legal loopholes or uncertainties. The World Economic Forum recognises that the majority of microplastics in the marine environment comes from 'secondary microplastics', a result of degradation of larger plastics³. Plastic pollution is already a major concern for both the environment and human health. It still faces difficulties regarding monitoring and treatment possibilities. For those reasons and to stress the importance of the required "preventive" character of this regulation, the definition needs to be the first instrument to provide a clear framework for fighting microplastics pollution.

2 Consolidate transparent and science-based data of the whole life cycle of microplastics

We need to share European-wide standards, methods and given information publicly to improve the science on the risks and occurrence of microplastics pollution. It will allow limiting further damage to the environment and public health, which already constitutes a major problem, especially as it is a recent and still unknown risk. The European Union already recognised the lack of reliable information on levels of primary microplastics entering Europe's sewage systems or surface waters.⁴ That includes:

- **An analytical standard** which is based on scientifically valid and accepted methods for microplastic measurement for microplastic release is critical.
- **Methods to quantify the presence of microplastics** in water must also be universalized in order to reach a more reliable and valid understanding of the microplastic situation in Europe and the world.
- **Data transparency** plays a big role in order to change consumption habits and to accelerate research work through cooperation and sharing knowledge. The European Commission needs to provide sustainable information and a clear labelling, including the whole supply chain and the totality of environmental and material information of products along their entire life cycle, as well as their quality and the quantity of plastics used. For an effective change of consumption, that information should be openly accessible and cost-free.

3 A new life cycle approach for plastics that leaves no one behind

While working on the best practices and technologies, the European Commission needs to fix European-wide standards regarding the whole life cycle of microplastics and consumption habits of the economy without putting the weight of the transition on the consumers' shoulders. IUNC assessed that "the main 'primary microplastics released in the ocean mainly originate from land activities'⁵.

1 UNEP: <https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/12079/brochure-microplastics.pdf?sequence=1&%3BisAllowed=>

2 European Union: https://ec.europa.eu/environment/topics/plastics/microplastics_en.

3 World Economic Forum: https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_The_New_Plastics_Economy.pdf.

4 Umweltbundesamt: https://www.umweltbundesamt.de/sites/default/files/medien/378/publikationen/texte_64_2015_sources_of_microplastics_relevant_to_marine_protection_1.pdf.

5 IUNC: <https://portals.iucn.org/library/sites/library/files/documents/2017-002-En.pdf>.

That includes:

- **Avoiding microplastics pollution at the source** is the most effective measure: **reducing production and consumption of plastics**, by developing alternatives or non-chemical materials. The textile industry together with tire dust are the main source of microplastics in the ocean⁶ and therefore, must embrace their societal responsibility. The solutions lie also in a wider frame of behavioural **change of consumption patterns** and uses of materials, as well as **avoiding the commercialisation** of materials with high potential for releasing microplastic particles.
- **Ending the waste status at the end of the life cycle** of microplastics through **treatments, recycling techniques** and **standards for microplastics releases** on the European level; in order to prevent any further harm that they could cause to the human health on bathing areas (BWD) and also through drinking water (DWD). Microplastics are already found not only in the environment but even in human blood⁷.
- **Leaving no one behind** is a key priority in the agenda for transformative change thus policies should ensure that the transition towards a sustainable and circular economy is **affordable for everyone**. Therefore, the burden of disposal should rely on the industries; environmentally friendly products should be incentivized, while conventional polluting products should be commercialized including the cost of negative environmental externalities.

Lastly, we reaffirm our societal responsibility to build a Water-Smart Society. Wastewater treatment plants must continue being supported and well equipped with microplastic retention technologies to contribute to a healthy environment.

⁶ IUCN: <https://portals.iucn.org/library/sites/library/files/documents/2017-002-En.pdf>.

⁷ H.A. Leslie, M.J.M. van Velzen & co., *Discovery and Quantification of Plastic Particle Pollution in Human Blood*, Environment International (2022) <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0160412022001258#!>.

