

27 February, 2018

To: Ministers and Ministries of Environment in EU Member States around the Baltic Sea

Dear Minister,
Dear Sir/Madam,

The European Commission's Plastics Strategy, which is on the agenda for next week's Environment Council, is an important step to combat marine litter. The discharge of plastics into the marine environment is not abating, and once there, plastics are difficult to get rid of.

The continuous accumulation of plastics is concerning for the sensitive and land-locked Baltic Sea. The water exchange is slow and the degradation time for potentially degradable plastics is further prolonged due to the Baltic Sea's cold and dark conditions.

Marine animals are exposed to plastic litter that can cause harm by ingestion and entanglement, and to fragmented plastics that are ingested at all levels of the food web, with the ability to transport from one species to another. Harmful effects have e.g. been observed in langoustines exposed to microplastic fibres over eight months, which resulted in weight loss and a poor nutritional condition. Damage caused by marine litter to the marine environment may also prove costly, affecting tourism, fisheries and shipping. The Plastics Strategy states that the cost of litter to EU fisheries is estimated to about 1% of total revenues from catches by the EU fleet.

This gives cause for concern, and reason to limit the discharge of plastics to the marine environment by political means. The Stockholm University Baltic Sea Centre therefore calls upon you to work towards ensuring that strong measures are put in place in order to address the plastic pollution of our joint sea. Among the numerous measures needed to address the issue, we have chosen to focus on three areas.

Single-use plastics

Single-use plastics (SUPs) is a common type of litter. An overall reduction of SUPs is needed, but also smarter design – both for recyclability, by defining which type of plastics, colours and additives that facilitates this, and for lowering the environmental impact if littered. This is important as no recycling or waste disposal system can guarantee a 100 percent capture rate. Harmonised rules for acceptable degradation, including degradation time, need to be established for all new materials. These rules need to take environmentally relevant conditions into account, such as the conditions for the Baltic Sea with brackish water, low UV exposure and low temperature.

Intentionally added microplastics

Several EU countries have put forward legal proposals to ban microplastics in rinse-off cosmetics such as body scrubs and shower gels, with Sweden's ban coming into effect by 1 July 2018. These are important first steps, and the bans constitute a low hanging fruit since alternatives to microplastics are readily available. As a response to political processes and the public opinion, the industry is already broadly phasing out microplastics in rinse-off personal

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care products. It is therefore welcome to see that the European Commission intends to extend the ban to encompass all professional and consumer products containing intentionally added microplastics. It will be important in this regard to ensure that the ban covers all added microplastic materials which do not degrade at an acceptable time in a marine environment.

Additives in plastics

In many cases, various chemical additives, such as stabilisers, flame retardants, and softening agents, are added to give plastic materials their desired properties. The manufacturing process is never perfect, which means that additives can leach from the plastic into water, or directly into the body of animals that ingest the plastic. The substances in the plastic can also leach out during degradation in the environment. According to the EU list of priority pollutants, 61 percent of environmental pollutants on and in plastic debris in the oceans are classified as hazardous, as they cause genetic damage and can be carcinogenic or endocrine disruptive.

In order to reduce the negative impacts of plastics on marine organisms and the environment, the number of hazardous additives in plastics needs to be limited already at the production stage. In the European Commission's vision for Europe's new plastics economy it reads: "substances hampering recycling processes have been replaced or phased out". However proposed measures under the strategy foremost address removing substances of concern at the recycling stage rather than ensuring that these are removed from the market in the first place. We believe that materials need to be designed for safe recyclability or reuse from the start, with minimal use of substances of concern.

The measures that are to be developed under the umbrella of the Plastics Strategy will also help in achieving the aim of the HELCOM Regional Action Plan for Marine Litter, for which a significant reduction of marine litter is needed by 2025.

Our region is strong in innovation and the solutions to address the sources and minimise macro and microplastic pollution of the Baltic Sea are within reach. We hope that your commitment to a healthy Baltic Sea ecosystem will guide your actions towards ensuring a safe and circular economy.

Yours sincerely,



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Our policy brief *Microplastics in marine life: precautionary principle urges action* is found in annex.