

The logo consists of a solid blue rectangle. Inside the rectangle, the words "RETHINK" and "PLASTIC" are written in a white, hand-drawn, slightly irregular font. "RETHINK" is on the top line and "PLASTIC" is on the bottom line, both centered horizontally.

RETHINK PLASTIC

Rethink Plastic alliance welcomes proposal on pellet pollution, but urges Commission to also tackle the other major sources of microplastics pollution

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NGOs are calling on the Council of the European Union and European Parliament to reinforce the proposed regulation before the European elections.

Today, the European Commission published a rather disappointing proposal for a regulation on pellet loss and a brochure summarising ongoing activities on microplastics which fails to adequately address the main sources of unintentional microplastic pollution. After many years of waiting for an ambitious and comprehensive proposal, NGOs are relieved that the European Commission has finally addressed pellet loss with some measures, but at the same time are deeply concerned that the European Commission has decided against quick and ambitious steps to prevent microplastic emissions from other sources

Each year, an estimated one million tonnes of microplastics are released into the environment. The accumulation of toxic substances found in microplastic particles has dangerous effects on wildlife and humans alike, which has been widely documented in scientific research.

One source of microplastic pollution is from plastic production pellets, flakes, or powders – the raw material used to manufacture larger plastic products. These pellets are toxic and hazardous when spilled into the environment, due to their chemical additives and ability to absorb additional surrounding chemicals, and be ingested by fauna or carry around invasive species or pathogens. Until now, an ineffective voluntary scheme among producers called Operation Clean Sweep was the only measure in place.

Some parts of the proposal are promising: prevention given priority, mandatory certification, transparency in reporting, access to justice and penalty measures, particularly when it comes to larger operators. Unfortunately, there are no minimum requirements and some concerning loopholes: the scope is incomplete - the proposal seemingly excludes flakes and powders that present the same risk as pellets - and there are too many exemptions - for example the exemption for micro- and small companies handling below 5 tonnes per year. This is not the quick and ambitious approach that NGOs had hoped for.

Microplastics can also be released into the environment unintentionally through degradation of synthetic textiles, paints, vehicle tyres and other macroplastics, which the Commission brochure recognises as major pollution sources to be tackled. As these products are worn and used, they shed fragments and micro- and nanoplastics that eventually fly away or wash down drains and end up in our ocean or terrestrial ecosystems.

The Rethink Plastic alliance has been campaigning for an ambitious and comprehensive political framework to address the issue of unintentional release of microplastics from all sources for several years. This unambitious proposal - both in its scope and content - misses the mark and fails to fight microplastic pollution in a timely manner through a comprehensive and mandatory set of effective measures at the pollution source.

We call on the European Parliament and Council to introduce amendments to fill the proposal's gaps highlighted above and ensure robust measures to combat microplastic pollution are adopted in the short term. Only with preventative steps and strict, upstream control of all main contributing sources can we keep the planet clean and plastic free.

Frédérique Mongodin, Senior Marine Litter Policy Officer at Seas At Risk said:

“To achieve the ambitious target set out in the zero pollution action plan of cutting microplastics emissions by 30% by 2030, the Commission chose to focus legislative action on plastic pellets and microplastics added to products, the easiest sources of microplastic pollution to control. Although understandable in light of the adversity currently facing the EU Green Deal in both Parliament and Council, the European executive’s strategy signals curtailed ambition in addressing all responsible sources of microplastic pollution with immediate and binding measures.”

Lucie Padovani, Marine Litter Lobbying Officer at Surfrider Europe added:

We are relieved the European Commission has at long last released its proposal for regulation to address plastic pellet pollution in the EU. The proposal includes welcomed provisions that will facilitate access to justice and set penalties on companies that have until now been polluting with close to total impunity. However, we deeply deplore the EC’s proposal to introduce multiple derogations for micro and small companies, as well as companies which operate in installations handling below 1000 tonnes of pellets despite their significant contribution to today’s pollution. These derogations champion the very status quo responsible for wreaking havoc on our precious marine ecosystems and posing excessive risks on human health.

Amy Youngman, Legal and Policy Specialist at the Environmental Investigation Agency said: The exponential expansion of plastic production means the exponential transportation of plastic pellets around the world. While we welcome the Commission’s proposal to target pellets throughout the supply chain and address this critical issue, we feel that the EC's proposal can go further in achieving the necessary ambition to effectively reduce one of the sources of microplastic pollution with the most straightforward solutions. We thus look forward to the EU strengthening its proposal for more robust and comprehensive measures including improving the scope of the proposal and certain mandatory minimum measures to be adopted by the Commission in a more timely manner than currently proposed.

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