

Use of plastic bags: agreement on phasing down

The Permanent Representatives Committee confirmed an agreement with the European Parliament on new EU-wide rules for a reduction in the consumption of plastic bags. The agreement was reached in an informal trilogue on 17 November.

The new rules aim to limit the negative impacts of plastic carrier bag littering on the environment and encourage waste prevention and a more efficient use of resources. Littering of plastic bags results in accumulation in the environment, particularly in the form of marine litter. Once discarded, plastic bags can last for hundreds of years before they are fully degraded.

Gian Luca Galletti, Italian Minister for the Environment said: "The agreement reached enables Europe to effectively tackle a very relevant environmental problem, thanks to the joint efforts of its institutions: today we have the right tools to greatly limit the use of plastic bags and to disseminate new environmental best practices that contribute to developing waste management in the individual states and at European level".

New measures target plastic bags with a wall thickness below 50 microns, which represent the majority of plastic carrier bags consumed in the EU and are less frequently reused than thicker ones. To reduce consumption of these plastic bags member states would have a choice between mandatory targets or pricing. They will either take measures ensuring that the yearly consumption level does not exceed 90 lightweight plastic bags per person by 31 December 2019 and 40 lightweight plastic carrier bags per person by 31 December 2025 (or equivalent in weight) - or - they will adopt instruments ensuring that by 31 December 2018 these plastic bags will not be provided free of charge for consumers.

Very lightweight plastic carrier bags with a wall thickness below 15 microns can be excluded from these measures.

In addition, the European Commission and the member states will, at least during the first year after the date of transposition of this directive, actively encourage public information and awareness campaigns concerning the adverse environmental impact of excessive use of lightweight plastic bags.

Member states will have 18 months to incorporate the new rules into national legislation following their entry into force. Two years after the entry into force of the directive, the Commission will present two reports to the European Parliament and the Council. The first one will examine the impact of the use of oxo-degradable plastic bags on the environment. The second one will assess the different possibilities to reduce the use of very lightweight plastic bags. Both reports will be accompanied, if appropriate, by legislative proposals.

Next steps

The text will be examined by the European Parliament's Environment Committee. After approval by the Committee, the Council should adopt a political agreement at the Environment Council meeting on 17 December, followed, after legal-linguistic revision, by the adoption of its common position. The Parliament will prepare the adoption of the same text. The procedure could be completed in spring 2015.
