



EurEau
1975-2015

Water matters

Marine litter and micro-plastics

1. Background

The Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD, 2008/56/EC) was adopted on 17 June 2008 and came into force on 15 July 2008. It aims to achieve 'good environmental status' (GES) of the EU's marine waters by 2020, GES being described and assessed by eleven qualitative descriptors.

Descriptor 10 on 'marine litter', including micro-plastics, is a concern for EurEau as untreated/inadequately treated municipal sewerage (e.g. from overflows or WWTPs) and discharges from storm water drains are considered to be a land-based source of marine litter and micro-plastics.

In response to the agreement at the Rio+20 summit to achieve, by 2025, "significant reductions in marine debris to prevent harm to the coastal and marine environment", as well as the call in the 7th Environment Action Programme (7th EAP) for an EU-wide "quantitative reduction headline target" for marine litter by 2020, marine litter is high on the European political agenda.

EurEau welcomes the ongoing initiatives at global, European and national level that relate to marine litter and micro-plastics.

In particular, EurEau welcomes the action carried out by the Environment Ministers of Austria, Belgium, The Netherlands and Sweden, supported by Luxembourg, at the Environment Council meeting on 17 December 2014. These five delegations called on the European Commission and Member States to take urgent steps to address scientific gaps and ban micro-plastics in cosmetics and detergents.

EurEau welcomes the modifications brought by the European Commission to the legislation establishing the ecological criteria for the award of the EU Ecolabel for rinse-off cosmetic products. Those products containing micro-plastics will no longer be awarded the EU ecolabel from December 2015 onwards.



2. A need for a multi-level approach

Multi-level governance

Marine litter, including micro-plastics, is a global challenge for the marine environment that needs holistic solutions involving many stakeholders, also taking into account the polluter pays principle.

Wastewater infrastructure is only one pathway of marine litter to the marine environment. Moreover, it is not an original land-based source of marine litter or micro-plastics.

EurEau supports a European policy to prevent marine litter and coordination of regional and national actions on this topic as well as coherence between other relevant EU legislative instruments (Waste Framework Directive, Landfill directive (199/31/EC), WFD).

Coordination should also be ensured with the action plans on marine litter in the frame of the four Regional Sea Conventions.

EurEau is convinced that an EU-wide quantitative reduction headline target for marine litter can help to involve all stakeholders and support Member States in identifying this important issue, while exploring possible solutions with more priority.

Baseline data needed on marine litter sources

EurEau supports harmonized measurement and monitoring strategies to build up the currently lacking baseline data for European marine waters and to measure trends for characteristics and impacts of marine litter. However, it is crucial to also identify the different variety of sources and relative contributions of each possible pathway (cause-effect), including the land-based sources (linked with WFD monitoring), prior to any control measure in wastewater infrastructure being imposed at the end-of -pipe.

The particulate plastics (micro-plastics) are an emerging source of pollution and more specific information is needed on their sources and impacts on the environment before deciding if and what actions are needed. Especially good knowledge on the possible role of wastewater as a pathway is lacking. Here more specific monitoring and research is needed.

Source control approach is the first step

EurEau is in favour of source control actions to reduce marine litter and supports any product oriented action at European level, especially related to (micro-) plastics, such as:

- a. Legislation to ban single use plastic bags



- b. Legislation to ban and substitute micro-plastics in personal care and cosmetic products (microbeads)
- c. Promotion of use of biodegradable plastics and legislation to ban oxy-degradable plastics
- d. Use of eco-labelling and information on kind and amount of micro-plastics on products
- e. Legislation to avoid non-degradable flushables in wastewater
- f. Full application of waste legislation and related actions to reduce direct waste losses
- g. Innovative research for improved technologies, e.g. for laundry washing and textile finishing.

What happens at the waste water treatment plants?

The implementation of wastewater collection and treatment is mainly driven by UWWTD (91/271/EEC), setting standards for the treatment of sewage discharges from coastal, estuarine and riverine areas, hence preventing larger items of sanitary waste to be spilled into the marine environment after full compliance. Wastewater collection and treatment systems are not designed to remove tiny particles of non-degradable products such plastics or micro-plastics. The water sector knows that significant part of them are removed but, also, that the rest is released as such in the environment, through the WWTPs or the sewer overflows, supporting the need for source control.

Consumers' awareness

Awareness raising campaigns among citizens (customers, schools, retail sector ...) on sources and impacts can add to reduce spills of plastic litter, such as:

1. Drinking tap water decreases plastic bottles use
2. Flushing waste down the toilet should be avoided
3. Microbeads in products or personal care products should be avoided.



About EurEau

EurEau is the voice of Europe's water sector. We represent drinking and waste water service providers from 27 countries in Europe, from both the private and the public sectors.

Our members are the national associations of water services in Europe. At EurEau, we bring national water professionals together to agree European water industry positions regarding the management of water quality, resource efficiency and access to water for Europe's citizens and businesses. The EurEau secretariat is based in Brussels, from where we coordinate the work of around 150 experts from member organisations and utilities and advocate common positions with EU decision makers.

Our members are fully committed to the continuous supply of clean water and its safe return into the water cycle. As gatekeepers of Europe's water, we have a role in raising awareness of threats to the water environment. With a direct employment of around 500,000 people, the European water sector makes a significant contribution to the European economy.



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