

Press release

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PREVENTION IS BETTER THAN THE CURE WHEN TACKLING MARINE LITTER IN THE NORTH EAST ATLANTIC

OSPAR countries are now putting into practice their commitment to tackle the issue of marine litter in the North East Atlantic. Following the adoption of the Marine Litter Regional Action Plan, experts met in The Hague this week to discuss the practical implementation of the plan to address the unacceptably high levels of litter in some parts of the region.

The diverse and enthusiastic group, representing 15 countries along with the EU (and observers from Seas at Risk and KIMO), agreed that tackling litter at source was the key to solving the issue, which is impacting on all the world's seas and oceans.

Actions to combat sea-based sources include identifying options to address key waste items from the fishing industry and aquaculture as well as analysing penalties and fines for waste disposal offences at sea. However, as an estimated 80% of marine litter is thought to originate from land, the plan also includes a number of measures to combat this by engaging both industry and the public. These measures include; engaging with industry and other authorities to develop best environmental practice and prevent litter 'escaping' into the marine environment, along with actions looking at plastic bags, micro plastics in personal care and cosmetic products and the harm caused by cigarette butts.

John Mouat, OSPAR Deputy Secretary stated:

"OSPAR Countries in adopting the marine litter Regional Action Plan have recognised that the only way to reduce marine litter is through a collective action. Key to this is the involvement of stakeholders, including industry and NGOs, whose expertise will be critical in addressing the many sources of litter and plastics in particular.

Thousands of tonnes of litter still end up in the North East Atlantic every year; whilst actions to remove litter can help, the only way to reduce the problem is to stop litter reaching the sea in the first place. Therefore the RAP has a range of actions aimed at preventing litter entering the marine environment.

Full details of the Regional Action Plan on Marine Litter can be found on OSPAR's website www.ospar.org

ENDS

Note for editors

1. The [OSPAR Commission](#) was set up by the 1992 OSPAR Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the North-East Atlantic, which unified and updated the 1972 Oslo and 1974 Paris Conventions. It brings together the governments of Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom, together with the European Community.
2. More than 30 international non-governmental organisations are involved in OSPAR as official Observers. They represent a broad range of interests and expertise related to the marine environment and the uses of marine resources. Many contribute information, insights and standpoints. This is much appreciated feedback from civil society and the economy. The OSPAR Commission greatly values these partnerships that help inform its decisions and other results. (See list on OSPAR website at <http://www.ospar.org/content/content.asp?menu=0016>).
3. The [Bergen Statement](#) was adopted at the third Ministerial Meeting of the OSPAR Commission in 2010 in Bergen, Norway.
4. Marine Litter covers a wide range of materials which have been deliberately discarded, or unintentionally lost on beaches and on shores or at sea, including materials transported into marine environment from land by rivers, draining or sewage systems or winds. It includes any persistent, manufactured or processed solid material. Marine litter originates from different marine and terrestrial sources and is rooted in the prevailing production and consumption pattern.

Marine litter is not only an aesthetic problem but incurs socioeconomic costs, threatens human health and safety and impacts on marine organisms. It is broadly documented that entanglement in, or ingestion of, marine litter can have negative consequences on the physical condition of marine animals and even lead to death. Ingestion of micro plastics is also of concern as it may provide a pathway for transport of harmful chemicals into the food web. Additionally, marine litter is known to damage and degrade habitats (e.g. in terms of smothering) and to carry the risk for the transfer of alien species.

Marine litter consists of a range of materials, including plastic, metal, wood, rubber, glass and paper. Although the relative proportions of these materials vary regionally, there is clear evidence that plastic litter is by far the most abundant type. In some locations in the OSPAR region, plastics amount to 90 % of marine litter of shorelines. A similar predominance of plastics is reported from sampling at the sea surface and on the sea bed.

Most plastics are extremely durable materials and persist in the marine environment for a considerable period, possibly as much as hundreds of years. Plastics also deteriorate and fragment in the environment as a consequence of exposure to sunlight (photo-degradation) in addition to physical and chemical deterioration. This breakdown of larger items results in numerous tiny plastic fragments which remain in the marine environment along with other micro plastics produced either for direct use - such as for industrial abrasives or cosmetics - or for indirect use - such as preproduction pellets or nurdles.

Biodegradable plastics can also cause problems in the marine environment as most can only biodegrade under specific conditions of constant temperature and humidity in industrial composting installations and therefore do not degrade in a reasonable time when entering the marine environment as litter. Moreover, many biodegradable plastics may not degrade in the intestines of marine species. Hence injury and starvation are likely to remain issues.