



EPR as an instrument to tackle microplastics pollution (2)



24 February 2021, 14:00 – 16:00 CET
Online Event

Hosted by MEP Franc Bogovič

Chair of the “Bioeconomy” Working Group of the European Parliament Intergroup on
“Climate Change, Biodiversity and Sustainable Development”

Speakers:

- **MEP Franc Bogovič**
 - **Michel Sponar**, Deputy Head of Unit on Marine Environment and Water Industry, DG ENV, European Commission
 - **Elena Buzzi**, Junior Policy Analyst, Resource Efficiency and Circular Economy Team, Environment Directorate, OECD
 - **Oliver Loebel**, Secretary General, EurEau
 - **Mauro Scalia**, Sustainable Businesses Director, Euratex
 - **MEP Stelios Kypouropoulos**
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Opening Remarks

MEP Franc Bogovič

“We need further measures to address the sustainability challenges coming from plastics, as well as new measures improving waste management, including innovative eco-design measures and labelling standards”.

In his opening remarks, hosting MEP Mr. Franc Bogovič provided a brief recap of the first event’s focus, notably on the origins of microplastics and the legislative and practical measures implemented to address their environmental impacts. Mr. Bogovič noted that **while regulatory and legislative tools at EU level exist**, including levies, bans and voluntary efforts, **they have a limited impact on the sustainable transition**, given the exponential **yearly growth of the use of plastics** and the seamless **synthesis of new and potentially polluting materials**. Then, MEP Mr. Bogovič introduced the agenda of the day, notably on the **Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) as a policy instrument for stimulating more sustainable production**. To conclude, Mr. Bogovič recalled the consensus achieved during the first webinar on the need for cross-sectoral collaboration, while stating the need to further raise EU-wide awareness.

EPR - instrument for “Plastics and circular economy”

Michel Sponar, Deputy Head of Unit on Marine Environment and Water Industry, (DG ENV), European Commission

“It is imperative to shift the focus on the application of EPR schemes and its acceptability, bringing to light the quantification of microplastic release to the environment and the need to strike a fair costs allocation”.

To begin with, Mr. Sponar noted that the **issue of microplastics** had received **full attention from the European Commission** within the framework of the **European Strategy for Plastics in a Circular Economy** and revealed that it will continue to be the case under the new **EU Green Deal**. Subsequently, focusing on the main sources of microplastics, Mr. Sponar stressed

the **primary role of unintentional releases from tyres, textile and plastic pellets**. In addition, Mr. Sponar presented the range of European Commission's upcoming initiatives to minimize the production of microplastics at source. Awaiting finalization under the REACH regulation with regards to intentionally added microplastics, the European Commission is heading towards a **ban of the latter with regards to cosmetics, detergents, paint and oxo plastics**. Mr. Sponar also mentioned the issue of micro plastics in sludge from wastewater treatment plants – which when they are reused in agriculture might represent an important source of micro plastics spreading. Moreover, the European Commission is currently working on the **harmonization of the measurement methods**, the introduction of **minimum requirements** and the development of an **integrated approach for tyres and textiles, the review of the Urban Waste Water Directive (UWWTD)** which could also be helpful to better 'capture' micro plastics. Shifting the focus on the **application of EPR schemes**, Mr. Sponar addressed some key challenges ahead, mentioning first of all that so far there are no available techniques to capture micro plastics once they are released in the water and before they are concentrated into the sludges. This could change in the future and already now it is recognised that a better capture of stormwaters overflow and urban run off can contribute to reduce micro plastics releases in the environment. This will be further analysed in the context of the ongoing impact assessment on the review of the UWWTD. Other challenges are related to the **feasibility of the system**, its **acceptability**, the issue of **quantifying microplastics placed on the market, alongside their release to the environment** and the need to strike a **fair costs' allocation**. Mr. Sponar concluded by remarking the need for the European Commission to direct its efforts towards action at source, while maintaining efficient end-of-pipe treatment plants to avert microplastic leakages. Last but not least, Mr. Sponar referred to **EPR as a helpful tool for avoiding that the treatment costs fall back on water cost, on the condition that more budget is allocated for wastewater treatment and collection**.

Elena Buzzi, Junior Policy Analyst, Resource Efficiency and Circular Economy Team, OECD Environment Directorate

“EPR is a relevant policy tool, however its cost-effectiveness needs to be further evaluated. Other policy instruments will also need to be considered in support or as an alternative to it.”

Representing the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Ms. Buzzi placed mitigation measures for microplastics pollution and the relevance of EPR at the core of her intervention. Ongoing OECD work on microplastics shows that several mitigation actions could be implemented along the lifecycle of products to reduce **unintentional microplastics emissions from tyres and textiles**, including emerging **technologies and best practices** at the level of design, manufacturing, and use, and **end-of-pipe systems** for the treatment and capture of microplastics. Although further work and inter-disciplinary cooperation is required to close knowledge gaps and standardise methods, **microplastics emissions can already be targeted via “no-regrets” interventions**, i.e. policy measures driven by other policy goals that produce **co-benefits in terms of microplastic mitigation**. For instance, reductions in overall passenger vehicle use can lower GHG emissions and air pollution, as well as microplastics generation. Ms. Buzzi noted that several policy instruments could be considered to mandate, incentivise, or encourage the uptake of mitigation best practices and technologies, either to reduce emissions at source or to improve the end-of-pipe capture. Zooming in on the relevance and potential of EPR, Ms. Buzzi highlighted that in OECD countries EPR schemes **have contributed to a reduction in landfilling and an increase in recycling**, and have **reduced the burden on municipalities** by charging producers for some of the costs linked to waste collection. Drawing from past and ongoing work, **Ms. Buzzi proposed some criteria to assess the adequacy of EPR to address microplastics**, mainly in terms of **feasibility, implementation costs, cost-effectiveness, and potential to drive eco-design**. In her conclusion, **Ms. Buzzi qualified EPR as a relevant policy option to enhance microplastic treatment**, nonetheless wondering whether the significant implementation burden it entails compared to simpler policy tools is justified by additional benefits.

Oliver Loebel, Secretary General, EurEau

“EPR can only be complementary to strong and effective control-at-source and precautionary measures.”

Representing the European Federation of Water Services (EurEau), Mr. Loebel first highlighted the pieces of EU legislation (Directive 2018/851 and 2019/204) where the EPR principle is recalled, highlighting its consistency with the polluter-pays and the precautionary principles enshrined in the Treaties and the Water Framework Directive. Subsequently, Mr. Loebel introduced **“EPR on micropollutants and microplastics released from products”**, a EurEau-Deloitte study focused on **how EU horizontal and/or product-specific legislation should be amended in order to apply the EPR schemes to microplastics and micropollutants**. The research found that the **combination of mandatory control-at-sources measures with mandatory post-market EPR measures is the optimal solution in terms of policy efficiency**. Furthermore, it highlighted that **EU sectoral legislation for textiles leaves little scope to implement EPR schemes, although the EU Textile strategy might change this**. On the other hand, **tyre-related rules do offer opportunities**. Drawing on these findings, Mr. Loebel recognized that **EPR as a stand-alone policy will not prevent water’s pollution derived from microplastics**. In his concluding remarks, Mr. Loebel pointed that **control-at-source measures are fundamental to tackle the problem of microplastic pollution**. **If end-of-pipe measures become necessary, they should be financed by EPR schemes**. Furthermore, Mr. Loebel noted that the Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive is not the appropriate tool to address the issue due to the high number of other pathways and the impact on circular economy options.

Mauro Scalia, Sustainable Businesses Director, Euratex

“We believe that it is only working on scientific evidence and results that the best solutions can be found.”

Representing the European Apparel and Textile Confederation (Euratex), Mr. Mauro Scalia presented the efforts undertaken by the Cross Industry Agreement with the textile and clothing industry jointly with other industries and worldwide researchers to address the issue of microplastics, most notably the development of a **harmonized test method** to quantify microplastic release when washing different synthetic textiles. Mr. Scalia set out **some elements that would ensure the effectiveness of EPR** in the transition to Circular Economy: EPR should be designed to **support solutions for circular textiles** while being **sensitive to quality of different textiles**. The **necessity of more and better data** to investigate possible solutions and to assess the risks deriving from microplastics - and to ensure the **feasibility and effectiveness** of proposed policy measures - was underlined as well. Mr. Scalia concluded his intervention by stating the need for stakeholders' commitment to tackle the microplastics' issue and work together based on **fact and scientific research**.

Reaction from MEPs

MEP Stelios Kypouropoulos

“The coverage and quality of EPR schemes is important because they give economic incentives needed for two reasons: to accelerate the new circular regime and to destabilize the old, linear one”.

MEP Mr. Kypouropoulos started his intervention by reminding the magnitude of plastic usage, highlighting that in the EU, the plastic industry has a turnover of 340 billion euros and sustains 1.5 million jobs. Given that less than 30% of plastic waste produced in the EU is recycled, **the potential for recycling plastic remains largely unexploited**. This brings significant economic and environmental damages. Furthermore, MEP Mr. Kypouropoulos highlighted the **importance of supporting circularity at all stages** of the product life cycle. As the successful examples in the Netherlands and Flanders show, **Circular Procurement bears the potential to fast-track the development of a circular economy**. To this end, Mr. Kypouropoulos proposed the creation of training programmes on Circular Procurement in all Member States, and the establishment of public-private partnerships to provide support to SMEs in implementing circular models. Mr. Kypouropoulos also stressed the need to focus

on the **coverage and quality of EPR schemes** to attain their double objective of internalizing costs related to end of life management and fostering more sustainable practices. According to MEP Mr. Kypouropoulos, to encourage the green transition, EPR schemes must ensure a **clear allocation of responsibilities**, incentives for municipalities and producers, and **effective monitoring and enforcement mechanisms**. Likewise, EPR schemes need to be based on **EU-wide criteria** and include minimal requirements in terms of product design, material origin, and additives problematic for waste management, among others. Finally, as underlined by Mr. Kypouropoulos, the integration of EPR schemes in the sustainability and circularity objectives of the EU, and their **extension to additional types and applications of plastics**, is also necessary.

Panel Discussion

The panel discussion started with the reactions of the speakers to the opening remarks delivered by Mr. Sponar on behalf of DG ENV. To begin with, Ms. Elena Buzzi agreed with **the need for holistic approaches** stated by many of the panellists, and insisted on the need to implement an appropriate mix of source-reduction and end-of-pipe policy tools to meet the **remaining challenges** in terms of **cost and responsibility assignment**. Mr. Dubois, also from OECD, elaborated on the **main barriers** to consider while implementing an EPR scheme to tackle microplastics pollution; **the lack of reliable data is an important challenge**. Moreover, although the principle for applying EPR – internalizing an external cost – is clearly applicable to the issue of microplastics, **feasibility** remains a key concern. The **efficiency and effectiveness** of an EPR scheme should be ensured prior to its roll-out. Mr. Loebel also agreed with the need for a wide range of policy tools to be considered and stated the need to build on the consensus on control at the source by **taking measures further down the production chain**. In this spirit, measures should be assessed in terms of **their effectiveness, cost, and synergy with the European Green Deal**. Mr. Loebel further underlined the need to develop test methods; however, exact quantification of total releases is not the key challenge and should not prevent action. In addition, Mr. Loebel praised the example of the **Single-Use Plastic Directive**, which has shown that the **EU is willing to implement EPR schemes for diffuse problems** such as littering. While EPR is one of the potential policy tools, **other options based on the polluter-pays principle should also be discussed**. During the discussion part,

Mr. Scalia stressed the need to be mindful of the **feasibility and enforceability** of any system, insisting on the need for data and research, and on the challenges of setting up the EPR scheme and ensuring it contributes to the reduction of microplastics' emissions at the source or any step of the value chain. Mr. Scalia welcomed the initiative of the European Commission in proposing an **EU strategy for sustainable textiles**, that he hoped would improve the **coherence** of the many initiatives affecting the textile industry and support better ways to design, make, use, and dispose of textiles. Mr. Sponar argued for the **need to differentiate between policy instruments**, reminding that **EPR is complementary with stronger measures** addressing intentional releases or highly polluting products. Although EPR has been successful in achieving environmental objectives in the past, one key remaining question in the case of microplastics is the **potential use of funds obtained through EPR**, Mr. Sponar added, citing the **lack of clarity about the economic costs** associated with them at the moment. Although there is a need for standard **data and quantification**, this **must not be a pretext not to act**. As a result, continued dialogue between all the stakeholders is necessary to achieve optimal solutions. Ms. Buzzi concurred that the need for further research and standardized methods, although real, does not **justify** delaying intervention. There are already key **opportunities to intervene by exploiting synergies** with other environmental policy objectives and best practices. Given that **EPR schemes have high administrative costs**, Ms. Buzzi highlighted the **need to demonstrate their value added** relative to simpler measures.

Closing remarks

MEP Franc Bogovič

Hosting MEP Franc Bogovič concluded the event by welcoming the **panel's agreement on the need for holistic approaches** that use a diversity of policy tools and are based on the **polluter-pays principle**. Mr. Bogovič also highlighted the consensus on the role to be played by the European Commission in leading **regulatory measures**, which must be complemented with **industry expertise** and **technological advances**, making it possible to **develop solutions in line with the European vision on the Green Deal and the circular economy**. Finally, MEP Mr. Bogovič warmly welcomed the great interest, raised by the two webinars on EPR, and praised

them as an example of the much-needed multi-stakeholder dialogue aimed at building common, acceptable solutions to the challenges posed by climate change.