

Reducing Disposable Plastic Bags in Food Stores and Other Outlets

Two years ago, the European Commission issued a Directive that promotes decreased use of lightweight plastic bags, which provide consumer convenience but unacceptable danger to the environment. While the deadline for implementation of Directive 2015/720 has already passed, only some EU Member States have promulgated the necessary measures.

The Directive requires that Member States take steps “ensuring that the annual consumption level does not exceed 90 lightweight plastic carrier bags per person by 31 December 2025, or equivalent targets set in weight” and/or “the adoption of instruments ensuring that, by 31 December 2018, lightweight plastic carrier bags are not provided free of charge at the point of sale of goods or products, unless equally effective instruments are implemented.” In both cases, very light plastic bags may be excluded.

Moreover, this spring the European Commission is required to adopt an implementation act laying down the specifications of labels or marks to ensure union-wide recognition of biodegradable and compostable plastic bags and to provide consumers with the information about the composting properties of such bags.

Using figures gathered from Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, and Slovenia, an average person in these European countries uses an estimated 466 lightweight plastic bags per year. This compares with an EU average of 200 bags per year and shows where the most progress can be found. Considering that lightweight plastic bags are used only for a very short time (in France, an average of 20 minutes), the

amount of used plastic seems disproportionate to the need.

The environmental impact of lightweight plastic bags is significant. Only 7 percent of used plastic bags are recycled. A fair amount can be found in the sea, where they represent 75 percent of marine waste. Furthermore, plastic bags take 400 years to degrade.

According to the UN, more than 800 wildlife species are affected by oceanic debris. Seabirds, turtles, seals, sea lions, jellyfish, whales, and fish are all endangered by floating plastic. These animals may die or fall ill when they get entangled in debris or ingest bags. The European Commission has found that 94 percent of seabirds’ stomachs in the North Sea contain plastic. Ultimately, human health is also concerned, considering that fish that have ingested plastic enter our food markets.

The European Commission’s new Directive is timely. However, it is questionable whether the different approaches of Member States will be equally successful. Ten Member States have announced detailed plans (Austria, Bulgaria, Denmark, Germany, Finland, France, Ireland, Lithuania, the Netherlands, and the U.K.), some of which have already been implemented.

For instance, Italy has banned plastic bags altogether. Other Member States tax their distribution. The U.K. has introduced a five-pence levy on lightweight plastic bags and Belgium has a similar measure. Cyprus and Greece, on the other hand, have not announced any measures. Should a Member State fail to implement the EU requirements, the European Commission has the right to launch infringement proceedings against it.

France has taken the most radical



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approach, banning the use of lightweight plastic bags in stores altogether but providing for a transition period. Before January, the distribution of lightweight plastic bags at cashpoints was already prohibited, while plastic bags for fruit and vegetables and fresh meat and fish were still allowed. From now on, the latter have had to be replaced by biodegradable bags.

However, the European Commission estimates in Point 18 of Directive 2015/720 that it can be misleading to refer to lightweight plastic bags marked as “oxo-biodegradable” or “oxo-degradable” by their manufacturers as actually biodegradable. These bags are conventional bags that contain additives that enable the fragmentation of the bag into particles that unfortunately remain in the environment. Thus, they may actually increase pollution.

The European Commission has now required that the environmental impact of these bags be examined. It appears as if the replacement of lightweight plastic bags with supposedly degradable bags will not necessarily lead to less plastic waste in the environment.

The Directive itself will certainly lead to the reduction of lightweight plastic bags and, hence, contribute to decreasing pollution in the EU. However, it remains to be seen whether all measures of the EU Member States will equally help achieve the goal of the European Commission to reduce plastic waste.