

Draw up a new Microplastics Action Plan for Wales

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Petition title: Draw up a new microplastic action plan for Wales

Text of petition: Microplastic particles have been found from the highest mountain tops to the deepest oceans and plastic microfibres from the clothes we wear are estimated to make up about 35% of the entire plastic pollution in our seas and oceans. Microplastics have been found to be toxic to marine life and growing evidence suggests they are harmful to life on land, including ourselves.

We call on Welsh Government to draw up a new Microplastics Action Plan to protect life in our seas and on our land.

Microplastics are thinner than a human hair but they are causing big problems for life in our oceans and on our land. They come from many sources including plastic bottles, vehicle tyres and even from paints on buildings and road markings.

They are also in the air and in our food chain. Fragments have even been found in the blood in 8 out of 10 people with as yet unknown health effects.

Welsh Government has a strong record of action on plastics but there is scope for increased action on microplastics.



We ask that Welsh Government work with relevant organisations and experts to draw up a Microplastics Action Plan to include things like addressing plastic microfibre release and microplastic pollution on land and in water courses around Wales and the provision of education about these issues in schools.

Microplastic pollution is a big problem in Wales - we must address it.

1. Background

Microplastics are plastic particles which are just a few millimetres in size, less than 5mm in any dimension. They can be categorised into two main types: primary and secondary

1.1.a. Primary Microplastics

These are microplastics that have been manufactured to be microplastics e.g. microbeads, as well as microfibers shed from clothing and other textiles, such as fishing nets.

A 2016 report by environmental consultants Eunomia, 'plastics in the marine environment', shows that tyre wear and pellet spills are the most prevalent source of primary microplastics. Plastic pellets, otherwise known as pre-production pellets or 'nurdles', are microplastics used in the production of plastic products.

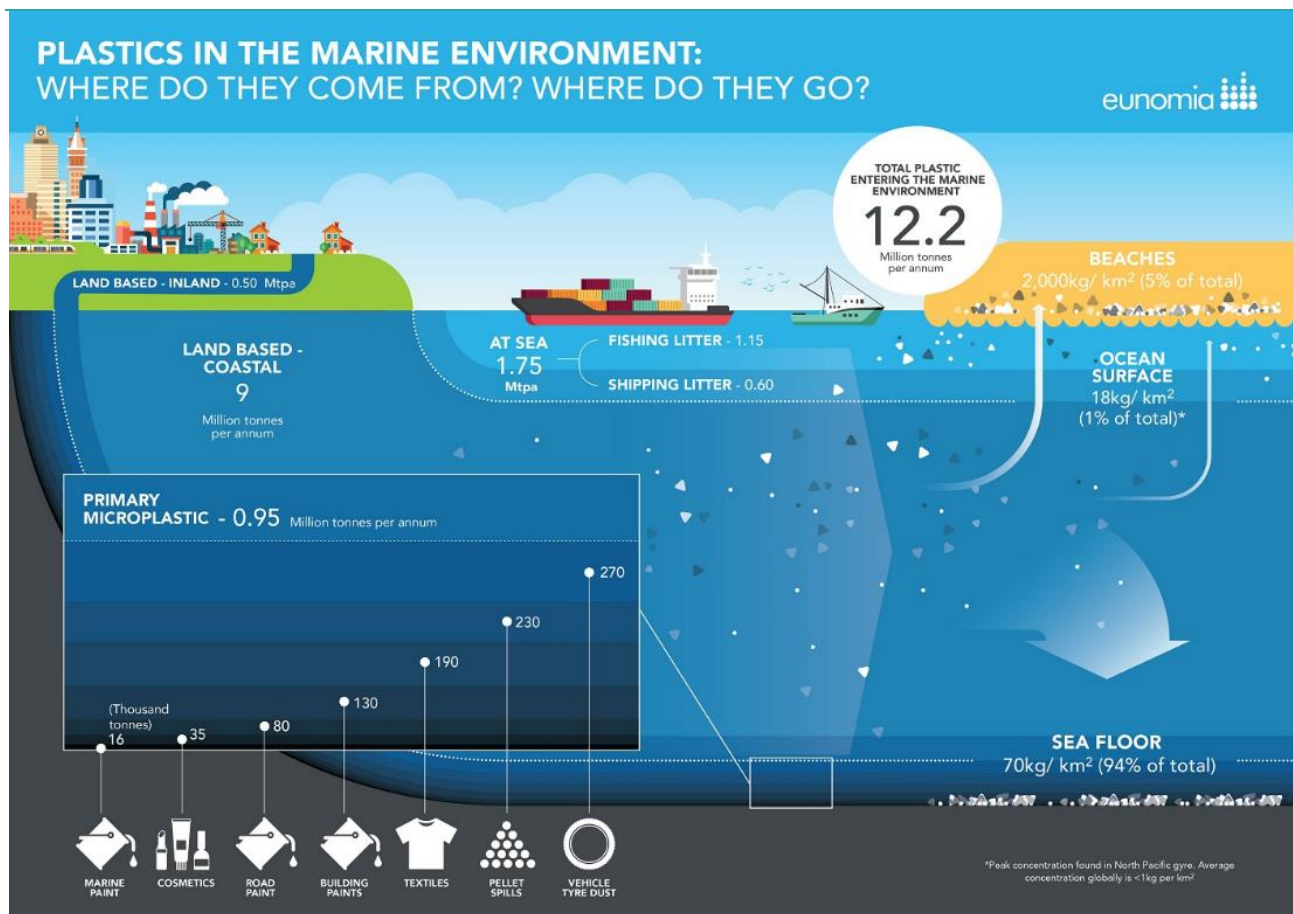


Figure 1. Plastics in the marine environment. [Source: Eunomia]

1.1.b. Secondary Microplastics

Secondary microplastics are created by the breakdown of larger pieces of plastic by external factors such as UV radiation, wind, waves, animals etc. As 80% of plastic pollution entering the marine environment is understood to be from land-based sources, macroplastics (larger plastic items) are a key source of microplastic pollution.

A 2017 report by OSPAR, assessment documents of land-based inputs of microplastics in the marine environment, shows that land-based litter is the cause of some of the highest emissions of microplastics in OSPAR countries, second only to tyre wear.

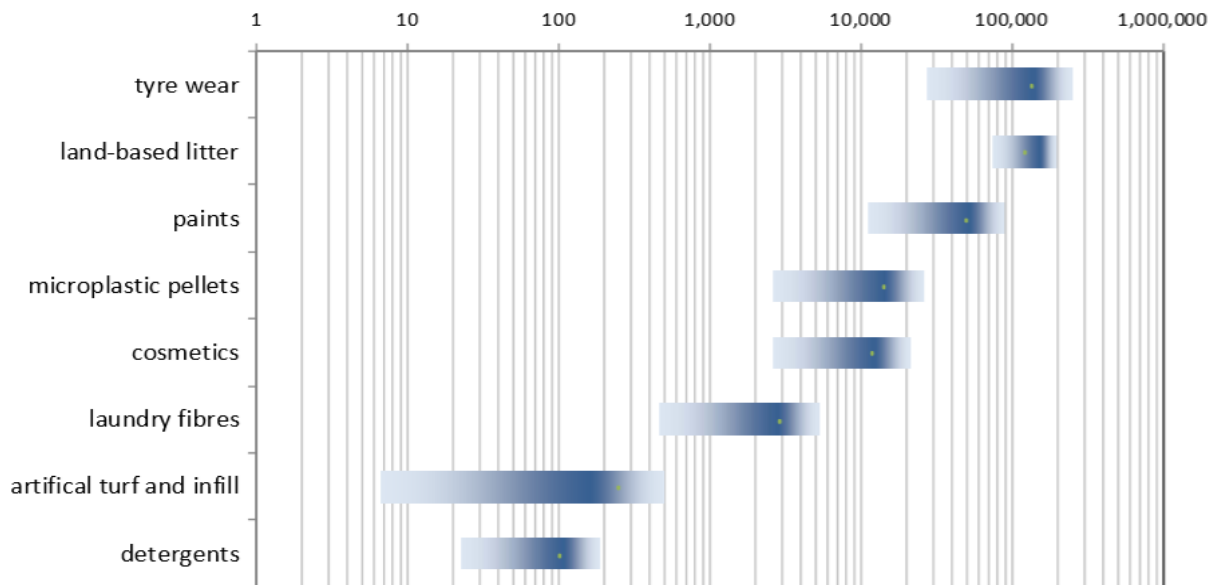


Figure 2. Estimated emissions of microplastics in OSPAR catchments (tonnes/year).
[source: [Ospar](#)]

Note: The bars represent the uncertainty margins of the emission, white dots represent the midpoint.

1.2. Impact of microplastics

Research has shown that ingestion of microplastics can have a negative effect on marine life. In addition, microplastics are able to absorb and concentrate pollutants from the surrounding environment (bioaccumulation), facilitating chemical pollutants entering the food chain.

Microplastics are known to be ingested by organisms throughout the food chain, and have been found in fish being sold for human consumption, as well as in bottled drinking water. Microplastics are also known to be inhaled or swallowed, and have been found in human blood. However, possible adverse effects of plastics on humans is hard to measure, and the extent to which they cause 'harm' is unknown.

2. Welsh Government action

The Welsh Government has introduced a number of measures to curb plastic pollution, including:

- introducing a charge on single-use carrier bags;
- banning microbeads in wash-off personal care products; and
- banning commonly littered single-use plastic products (due to come into force from October 2023).

The Environmental Protection (Single-use Plastic Products) (Wales) Act 2023 allows the Welsh Ministers to add items to the list of banned commonly littered single-use plastic products. In her response to this petition, the Minister for Climate Change, Julie James MS, confirmed that the Welsh Government is:

... already prioritising evidence gathering for other problematic products that contribute to microplastic pollution such as wet wipes.

When flushed, wet wipes not only cause blockages, but also release plastic microfibers into the environment. The Minister told the Climate Change, Environment and Infrastructure Committee (September 2022) that the “big issue with wet wipes” is labelling, which isn’t devolved to Wales. However the UK Government’s recent Plan for Water includes a commitment to consult on banning the use of plastic in wet wipes. In her response to this petition, the Minister said:

We are currently working with the UK Government and Devolved Governments on potential regulatory action in this area.

The Minister also highlighted Welsh Government work on introducing Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) and a Deposit Return Scheme (DRS).

Proposals for a UK-wide EPR scheme were jointly consulted on (by all four UK nations), and focused on moving the cost of dealing with packaging waste away from households, local taxpayers and councils, and onto the packaging producers. This is in line with the ‘polluter pays’ principle, where those who make pollution-causing products, pay the full costs when they become waste. The proposed EPR will:

... provide a financial incentive for producers to reduce the amount of packaging they place on the market and to improve the recyclability of packaging.

EPR was due to be implemented in a phased manner from 2024 (originally 2023), however this has recently been further delayed to October 2025.

Under a DRS, consumers are charged a sum of money as a deposit upfront when they buy, for example, a drink in a single-use container. This can be redeemed when the empty container is returned, increasing the number of containers captured for recycling.

DRS proposals were jointly consulted on (by the Welsh Government, the UK Government for England and the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in Northern Ireland) for a second time in 2021. The governments jointly responded in January 2023, and proposed a commencement date of 1 October 2025, however this is a “stretching target date”.

In the response to this petition, the Minister said:

We have also worked across governments to develop a British Standard to prevent the loss of plastic pellets to the environment during transport and production phases of plastic. We have collaborated on the development of a microplastics indicator for our seas.

3. Welsh Parliament action

The Fifth Senedd’s Climate Change, Environment and Rural Affairs committee undertook an inquiry into reducing plastic waste, where it looked at the sources and impact of microplastic pollution.

In January 2021, Huw Irranca-Davies MS asked the then Minister for Environment, Energy and Rural Affairs, Lesley Griffiths MS, for a statement on the Welsh Government's plans to tackle microplastic pollution in Wales. The then Minister highlighted that the Welsh Government was working with a number of organisations, including the UK Centre for Ecology and Hydrology (UKCEH) and UK Water Industry Research (UKWIR), on understanding microplastic pollution further.

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in this briefing is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.