

# Raising awareness on tobacco and plastics pollution

a partnership between the Secretariat of the WHO FCTC and UNEP Clean Seas Campaign

I urge all of you to join this campaign. Let's all do our part to ensure our seas and oceans – together with all their inhabitants – are protected for future generations.

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OF THE SECRETARIAT OF THE WHO  
FCTC**

The COVID-19 pandemic has made apparent, once again, the fact that we live in an interconnected world.

There are very few issues that can be considered simply “health problems”, as nearly every aspect of life is connected to other societal, economic and environmental issues. That is why the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* is “a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity”, and its 17 goals and 169 associated targets are “integrated and indivisible”. Tobacco control is linked to 67 of the Sustainable Development Goal targets, and it is integrated in Target 3.a on strengthening the implementation of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC).

We all recognize the health impact of tobacco, which kills more than 8 million people around the globe annually. We tend to think less frequently about the economic impact of tobacco use on health expenditures and productivity losses, which are equivalent to 1.8% of the world's annual gross domestic product. What is even less well known is how tremendously destructive tobacco cultivation and use are for the environment – on land,

water and air. The noxious effects of tobacco on the environment begin with the preproduction process, as massive deforestation occurs to create space for tobacco farming. Once tobacco is harvested, huge quantities of timber are required for drying the leaves. Estimates show that tobacco farming causes up to 5% of global deforestation, with 200 000 hectares of natural wood biomass lost each year.

During production, tobacco crops require large amounts of chemical fertilizers, pesticides and growth regulators that pollute the ground, nearby waterways and aquifers. In terms of health, tobacco cultivation also presents serious hazards for farmers and their families because of the intensive use of pesticides and nicotine poisoning due to the handling of the leaves.

When asked, many of us would probably guess that the most common form of plastic pollution would be plastic straws or bottles. While these are good guesses, in reality, cigarette butts, composed of thousands of cellulose acetate fibres, are the most widespread form of plastic waste in the world. An estimated 5.6 trillion cigarettes are smoked each year, out of which two thirds are disposed of improperly. That is an estimated 4.5 trillion cigarette butts being thrown away

every year worldwide, representing 1.69 billion pounds of toxic trash annually. Since the 1980s, cigarette butts have accounted for 30–40% of all litter found in coastal and urban litter clean-ups.

The cellulose acetate fibres in cigarette butts take years to degrade and disappear from the environment. These fibres, like other microplastics, are also a common contaminant found throughout the world's ecosystems, even accumulating at the bottom of the deep sea. Under specific circumstances – such as exposure to sunlight and moisture – cigarette filters break into smaller plastic pieces containing – and eventually leaching out – some of the 7000 chemicals contained in a single cigarette.

Many of these chemicals are themselves environmentally toxic, and at least 50 are known human carcinogens. Studies have also shown that harmful chemicals such as nicotine, arsenic, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, or PAHs, and heavy metals leach from discarded tobacco product waste, and they can be acutely toxic to aquatic organisms. Field researchers often find cigarette butts inside of dead sea birds, sea turtles, fish and dolphins. What's more, a 2011 study found that the chemicals leaching from smoked cigarette



butts and smoked and unsmoked cigarette filters can be lethal to freshwater and marine fish species. When ingested, the hazardous chemicals in microplastics cause long-term mortality in marine life, including birds, fish, mammals, plants and reptiles. These microplastics enter the food chain and are associated with serious human health impacts, which can include changes to genetics, brain development, respiration rates and more.

It thus comes as no surprise that the United Nations Development Programme (UNEP) has described tobacco as “a threat to our oceans”.

Article 18 of the WHO FCTC calls on countries to protect the environment and the health of people.

The UNEP and the Secretariat of the WHO FCTC recently launched a partnership to raise awareness and drive action on the extensive environmental and human

health impacts of microplastics in cigarette filters.

Through an extensive social media campaign, the partnership will aim to engage influencers, UNEP’s Goodwill Ambassadors and Young Champions of the Earth to raise awareness of the issues surrounding microplastics. It will also adopt a political advocacy approach, drawing upon the expertise of the Secretariat of the WHO FCTC. By highlighting a recent European Union directive requiring all tobacco products with plastic filters to be labelled clearly, the initiative will encourage citizens to advocate for similar changes globally. The regulation, which was adopted in December 2020 and took effect in July 2021, establishes harmonized labelling specifications for a wide range of products, including tobacco products with filters and filters marketed for use in combination with tobacco products, which contain plastics. The labelling

cannot obstruct in any way the visibility of the health warnings required by the Tobacco Products Directive on these packages – which, in the case of tobacco products for smoking, cover 65% of the front and back of packages – and, at the same time, cannot be totally or partially covered by other labels or stamps. The information text of the labelling must be in the official language or languages of the Member State(s) where the single-use plastic product is available.

Another exciting development occurred on 2 March 2022 when Heads of State, Ministers of Environment and other representatives from 175 nations endorsed an historic resolution at the Fifth session of the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA-5) in Nairobi to End Plastic Pollution and forge an international legally binding agreement by 2024. The resolution addresses the full life cycle of plastic, including its production, design and disposal.

The resolution, based on three initial draft resolutions from various nations, establishes an Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee, which will begin its work this year, with the aim of completing a draft global agreement by the end of 2024. It is expected to present a legally binding instrument, which would reflect diverse alternatives to address the full life cycle of plastics, the design of reusable and recyclable products and materials, and the need for enhanced international collaboration to

facilitate access to technology, capacity-building, and scientific and technical cooperation.

This partnership between UNEP and the Secretariat of the WHO FCTC is facilitated through the former’s Clean Seas campaign – a global coalition comprising 63 countries devoted to ending marine plastic pollution. It weds the Secretariat of the WHO FCTC’s experience on the health and public policy dimensions of tobacco products with UNEP’s research and advocacy on plastic pollution.

UNEP Clean Seas and the Secretariat of the WHO FCTC are committed to enabling meaningful change on microplastics by raising awareness on the fact that our health is intrinsically linked to that of our planet and to help drive policy in the right direction. This partnership signals an important first step towards resolving the critical health and environmental impacts of microplastics in cigarette filters. ■

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