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Single-Use Plastics Directive in Emilia-Romagna Region

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The Directive

The “Directive on the reduction of the impact of certain plastic products on the environment”, commonly referred to as the Single-Use Plastics (SUP) Directive, entered into force on 2 July 2019. It defines 'single-use plastic product' as a product that is made wholly or partly from plastic and that is not conceived, designed or placed on the market to accomplish multiple trips or rotations within its life span by being returned to the producer for refill or by being re-used for the same purpose for which it was conceived. Within the scope of the directive, bio-plastics (both biodegradable and compostable) are considered plastics and are subject to the same measures as other plastics. The Directive imposes EU-wide market restriction measures (bans) on the single-use plastics products for which suitable alternatives are readily available. This includes cutlery (forks, knives, spoons, and chopsticks), beverage stirrers, straws and plates (including paper plates with plastic lining).

The Consequences

This Directive has direct and inevitable consequences on the industry, particularly in Italy where 70% of plastic cutlery and plates made in Europe are produced. In particular, the Emilia-Romagna region, which earned the nickname “European packaging valley”, is one of the most involved territories at international level. According to Unioncamere, in the region the entire plastics sector employs more than 16,000 workers for 947 companies, which generate over 3,1 Billion € of income.

Moreover, in the region there is a very high concentration of packaging machinery manufacturers (from bottles to pallet wrapping films, the customer sectors that have plastic as a key material in the process represent over 60% of the volumes). Almost two out of three companies operating in this Italian mechanical niche are in Emilia-Romagna. According to Ucima, the sector association of packaging machinery manufacturers, in the region there are 230 companies with 17,800 employees, which generate an annual turnover of 5 billion € (out of the 7.8 total in Italy).

Some industries have already started processes of diversification towards other materials, especially bioplastics (the most similar to traditional plastics for workability), and in some cases vegetable fibers. The conversion brings along a few challenges, as it requires heavy investments and effort. But the main issue is the competition: this sector is already dominated by importers from the Far East, since many natural fiber products (as in bioplastics) are now produced in China.



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Governmental measures

Regional government is committed to taking appropriate measures, in line with the European Directive. The “Regional strategy for reducing the impact of plastics on the environment”, published in November, includes not only the promotion of actions to remove disposable plastic from offices, canteens, festivals and parties and to clean up public spaces, rivers, sea and beaches, but also the institution of a task force committed to identifying how and when to implement the actions, considering the conditions of social acceptability, the maintenance of employment levels and quality of work, and the impact on the business system. Funds and incentives are included, for the conversion of plastic-producing companies (with particular reference to single-use ones), as well as aid to public and private bodies that decide to reduce their plastic use.



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