



The Hub on Plastic Waste Prevention in the Emilia-Romagna Region

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The Hub

Within the scope of eCircular program, the activities carried out by the team of the University of Bologna over 2019 led to the validation of the regional hub model in the Emilia-Romagna region. The regional hub focuses on plastic waste prevention, and it has among its tasks the provision of support to local authorities in decision making. In parallel, after the issue of the “Regional strategy for reducing the impact of plastics on the environment” in November 2019, the Emilia-Romagna region launched a task force, to guide and monitor the implementation of the regional strategy: the scientific support of the University is crucial for this task.

Moreover, the University of Bologna and the Emilia-Romagna region are involved in the one-year project “Emilia-Romagna plastic free 2.0”, funded by the Italian Ministry for Environment, Land and Sea Protection. The objective is the creation of a regional observatory on plastics, with the aim to analyse the data of all the actors in the regional territory: industries, research institutions, commercial activities, universities, local authorities and citizens' representatives. Particularly, the activities include the review of the state of the art of technologies, economic models and environmental impacts of plastic products and the technical-scientific support to decision-makers, in order to prevent plastic waste and to assess alternative scenarios to fossil plastics.

Finally, the collaboration between University of Bologna and regional/local authorities is a key factor of the new EIT- Climate KIC project “MEDFreeSUP: Local application of SUP directive in the Mediterranean coast”. The project focuses on design and setting innovative experiments at city level to test the application of incentives to replace SUP products with a proven and monitorable environmental impact, and implementing integrated models of stakeholders' engagement in Italy (Emilia-Romagna region), Croatia and Greece. The objective of the project is to set replicable protocols voluntary for free single-use plastics food packaging adoption enforced at city level, for several types of food service operators (cafes, restaurants, foods stores, hotel, beach facilities).



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Consequences of the pandemic

After the COVID-19 pandemic, the urgency of measures' adoption to promote plastic waste prevention is even more evident. Plastic use and mainly single use plastic is subject to a new debate and there is a clear contrast between the drive to reduce the use of disposable plastic and the spread of SUP because of health and sanitary issues. On one side, a robust reduction of plastic products and plastic waste, advocated by many because of the dramatic consequences for health and environment, has been encouraged by the European plastic strategy and other European regulations during the past three years. On the other side, it is considered necessary to increase plastic goods' use, like during these months and as perhaps for years to come: concern about safety and cross-contamination has caused statewide, municipal, and corporate repeals of single-use plastic bans and this has been translated into a heightened demand for bottled water, personal protective equipment (PPE), plastic bags and packaging. And since the start of the coronavirus pandemic, many grocery stores have forbidden shoppers from bringing their own reusable bags and are handing out single-use plastic bags instead. Moreover, the cost-effectiveness of plastic is particularly desirable for manufacturers during economic difficulties, like this health crisis. Companies will be looking to reduce spending where they can, including packaging materials. Plastic is a versatile and cheap packaging solution.

The sustainability of plastic sector is under threat. According to a survey carried out by AMI International, involving 306 companies in plastic supply chain from five regions (Europe, North America, South America, Middle East and Africa, Asia), 37% of the companies of the rigid food packaging sector reported that covid-19 pandemic made recycling and sustainability less important or much less important to their business.

In Italy, beyond waste from PPE, masks and gloves, waste from plastic packaging has increased as consequence of COVID-19 crisis: the Italian consortium for the collection of this waste stream (COREPLA) reported an 8% increase in the amount of plastic packaging waste managed in the two-months period March-April 2020, compared to the same period in 2019. The increase is in contrast to the reduction in consumption (-4%) and in the production of municipal waste (-10/14%) in the same period.

The lockdown period has led to important changes in consumer behaviour: the purchase of packaged food has been favoured, online purchases and take-away food have increased. Moreover, as reported by the Italian Minister for Health, restaurant services are also sometimes favouring plastic and disposable crockery, although it is well known that washing normal reusable crockery with hot water can ensure adequate levels of hygiene (Commissione Ecomafie, 2020).

Moreover, as requested by Emilia-Romagna region, in May Italy has decided to postpone a new plastics tax that was set to come into force on July 1, 2020 until January 1, 2021. The relevant tax obligation arises in connection with the production or the import of plastic goods and the respective taxable event is identified as the moment of release into consumption of the single good in the Italian territory. The law is set to tax non-recyclable plastic packaging at a rate of € 0.45 per kilogram, with a significant decrease in contrast to the amount initially included in the draft of the Italian Budget Law. Disposable plastic packaging manufactured using bioplastics or recycled materials will be exempt from the tax, such as medical device and pharmaceutical packaging.



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