

Press Release No. 17/2013

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Tonnes of waste in the wrong place

International conference prepares action plans for clean oceans and seas

The volume of waste in the world's oceans has grown to over one hundred million tonnes. Some 600,000 cubic metres are thought to be on the seabed of the North Sea alone. The major type of waste is plastic. Many marine animals either ingest or become entangled in these plastics, leading to injury or even death. Germany and the European Commission want to drastically reduce waste deposition to the seas by 2020. The International Marine Litter Conference being held on 10-12 April in Berlin aims to come closer to achieving this aim. Its purpose is to identify appropriate strategies of waste prevention in Europe's marine regions and to make preparations for their implementation. The main type of measures envisioned are those that lead to the drying up of litter sources. Says Jochen Flasbarth, President of the Federal Environment Agency, "Litter is one of the gravest environmental problems for our world's oceans and seas. These waters are by no means clean nowadays. We now have the chance to define the right measures and move to implement them quickly. The most important objective of the International Marine Litter Conference in Berlin is to start this process." In principle this requires much greater preventative action. Measures must be directed primarily at input sources. Government guidelines and regulations are also needed as well as the cooperation of all the stakeholders: from fisheries and the tourism industry to local governments. Clean-up measures such as the "fishing for litter" campaigns by fisheries may also be of help.

The estimated 100-142 million tonnes of waste consists mostly of packaging materials and waste from the fishing industry and shipping. Plastics make up about three quarters of that volume, with up to 10 million tonnes currently being added every year. About 70 per cent of waste sinks to the seabed whereas the rest is either washed ashore or floats on the surface or in deeper ocean layers. Many animals ingest the waste, e.g. plastic particles, which they mistake for food. A study of dead fulmars along Germany's North Sea coast is proof: 95 per cent of the birds had ingested an average of 30 plastic particles. Yet another problem is the increasing spread of small and microscopic plastic particles, or so-called microplastics. The ratio of planktonic organisms to microplastic particles in the northwestern Mediterranean is now said to be 2:1. The EU Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD) makes provisions for monitoring litter on beaches, in the seas and in marine organisms. It also foresees effective programmes of measures

to avoid and prevent further inputs of waste. The UBA is hosting the International Conference on Prevention and Management of Marine Litter in European Seas on 10-12 April 2013 in Berlin on behalf of the Federal Ministry for Environment (BMU), in cooperation with the European Commission and with the close cooperation of the regional conventions on the protection of the marine environment. Scientists and representatives from industry, associations and politics will discuss suitable measures and exchange ideas on how to reduce marine litter. The results of the conference will have influence on the regional action plans for the European marine region that includes the North East Atlantic, Baltic Sea, Mediterranean and Black Seas. Jochen Flasbarth said, *"We already know enough to prompt preventative action. We will present a large number of good practice examples which can be implemented right away. Any existing gaps in knowledge must of course be closed in close cooperation with research. There are already many national, European and international research projects in place and others will certainly follow."*

The problem must be solved both at sea and on land. Waste management on ships and in ports is one key element. Waste can nowadays be treated on board by shredding different materials and preparing them for recycling upon collection in ports. Residual waste and food scraps can be used for thermal energy. Another solution is to levy port fees. The successful "No-special-fee" system in the Baltic Sea which automatically includes disposal fees should be extended to other marine regions such as the North Sea. Vessel crews must also be made aware of the problem of waste, for example through the "Fishing for Litter" initiative. This initiative is sponsored by BMU with scientific guidance from UBA. It involves fisheries collecting the litter they retrieve from the North and Baltic Seas while fishing, which is then disposed of in an environmentally friendly way in ports. Preventing further inputs of microplastics is another objective. Many cosmetics and toiletries such as body scrubs and toothpaste contain plastic beads to achieve a better cleaning result. After a single use they enter the seas through sewage since wastewater treatment plants do not usually filter them out. Manufacturers are also called upon to solve this problem by reconsidering the use of microplastics in products. Yet another approach to a solution is to levy a universal charge for the plastic bags used in retail trade.

Many successful measures to combat litter will be presented at the conference. The conference website features a database of these measures as does the conference discussion paper.

Further information

- [Conference website](#)
- [Conference press corner](#)
- [FAQ on marine litter PDF / 162 KB](#)
- [factsheet: Impact of marine litter PDF / 135 KB](#)
- [factsheet: Source of marine litter PDF / 216 KB](#)
- [factsheet: Measures for the prevention of marine litter PDF / 106 KB](#)
- [UBA-Schwerpunkte 2013](#)

Dessau-Roßlau, 10 April 2013