

Beijing Plastic Pollution Control Action Plan Work Focus: Unscrambled

On April 27, 2022, the Beijing Municipal Commission of Development and Reform and Beijing Municipal Ecology and Environment Bureau issued the *Beijing Plastic Pollution Control Action Plan 2022 Work Focus* ("Work Focus"), which sets out key tasks to promote the reduction of non-degradable disposable plastic products at source, accelerate the standardized recycling of plastic waste, and fully implement the clean-up and remediation of plastic waste in key areas. Work Focus deepened governance from 8 aspects and proposed 23 specific measures. Among them, source reduction of non-degradable disposable plastic products will be promoted as the use of non-degradable plastic packaging bags and disposable plastic woven bags will be banned from all shipping facilities in Beijing by the end of 2022. The Work Focus also pilots the reporting scheme for plastic-heavy companies and institutions, the establishment of a plastic reduction leader system, etc. The release of the Work Focus will further deepen plastic reduction in Beijing and bring new momentum to plastic governance.

The Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs (IPE) continues to focus on the progress of plastic governance, promoting plastic reduction and recycling mechanisms through projects such as the Green Supply Chain and the Waste-sorting Map. Recently, invited by the Beijing News Radio program "News Daily Talk", Ma Jun, director of IPE, made an explanation about the source reduction of single-use plastic products in the Work Focus, such as the treatment of plastic in shipping and e-commerce, plastic waste recycling model, and the substitution of biodegradable plastic.

1. To promote the source reduction of non-degradable single-use plastic products, why start with the express shipping industry? What impact will the implementation bring?

For Beijing to choose the express shipping and e-commerce industry as the entry point for plastic reduction, it can be interpreted from the rapid growth of the two industries that their plastic reduction work is insufficient. China saw a rapid increase in express shipping, reaching 83.36 billion packages shipped in 2020. Data shows that the increasing shipping packaging waste has accounted for 93% of the growth of domestic waste in megacities in China, with this figure reaching 85% to 90% in some large cities. The huge amount of plastic waste generated by the express shipping and e-commerce industry has put significant pressure on the environment.

A major international e-commerce company, for example, is estimated by relevant institutions that the plastic packaging waste it generated in 2019, the plastic bubble pad alone, can circle the Earth's equator 500 times. The amount of effort in the plastic reduction in the shipping industry does not match the current situation of its accelerating development.

In recent years, shipping packaging reduction work has been given attention to a number of major express shipping companies in China. Packaging reduction, recycling,

and recovery have achieved some success. As of the end of 2020, the usage rate of 45 mm slim tape reached 96.4%, e-commerce no double packaging rate of 72.1%, and recyclable transit bag, which can be reused more than 100 times, reached 93.8% application rate network-wide.

However, due to the rapid development of the industry, the total amount of plastic waste generated is still growing. Many companies still need to pay more attention to the importance of their responsibility in plastic reduction. There is still a lack of substantial plastic reduction goals, insufficient investment in research and development, and a lack of efforts in packaging recycling and its training and education. In this area, there is still a need to promote full life cycle plastic reduction, clarify responsibilities and goals, build a closed loop recycling system, and improve the relevant technology and standards. Therefore, it is reasonable to take the express shipping and e-commerce industry as the entry point.

The "plastic ban" order mainly prohibits the use of non-biodegradable plastic packaging bags and disposable plastic woven bags, which will prompt the shipping and e-commerce business to replace disposable plastic products with biodegradable materials, though more companies will seek to replace disposable plastic products with reusable materials. We believe this provision will also force companies to invest more into research and development of alternative materials to help find a sustainable alternative.

2. Accelerating the standardized recycling of plastic waste: regarding the exploration of waste recycling models and improving plastic waste regeneration rate?

Because of the convenience of plastic and economy of scale, it is unrealistic to completely ban plastic packaging at the current stage. The immediate focus should be on improving the level of recycling and reducing the use of disposable plastic. Especially in the express shipping and e-commerce industry, we should gradually build a perfect recycling system and encourage companies to build a recycling platform. At the same time, fully integrate the waste sorting system in the drop-off, clearance, and other aspects of integration to explore new models of recycling.

Plastic recycling needs appropriate standards. The goal should be to ensure easy recycling and reuse from the source, reflecting the concept of ecological design. Recently, the China Petroleum and Chemical Industry Federation and the China National Resources Recycling Association initiated the *Evaluation of Plastics Products' ease-to-collect & easy-to-regenerate Design* ("Double-E") standard. The Green Supply Chain CITI Index 2022 has included the Double E standard and equivalent standards to evaluate whether companies pay attention to improving the recyclability and environmental friendliness of plastic products in their own and suppliers' applications.

In addition, in promoting the standardized recycling of plastic waste, IPE and the Vanke Foundation developed the Waste Map in 2020, in which the effective separation and recycling of plastic waste play an important role. The Green Supply Chain CITI Index has also added evaluation indicators in the fifth chapter (promoting citizens' green choices). It aims to guide companies to participate in establishing waste recycling

systems or other methods in areas with more mature waste separation mechanisms, to guide the public to participate in sorting and recycling product waste and packaging, and to reduce the environmental impact on a large scale.

3. The experimental reporting system for plastic-heavy companies and organizations: what benefits does the reporting system bring?

The establishment of a corporate environmental information disclosure system is an important means of promoting corporate responsibility for environmental protection. One of the highlights of Beijing's work is the requirement to carry out an experimental reporting system for plastic-heavy companies and organizations. The specific requirements are as follows:

“13. The party and government organizations play a leading role in the use and recycling of single-use plastic products, reduction, and replacement measures, etc., pilot the 2022 annual report on the status of plastic use by party and government organizations and gradually push out to the state-owned enterprises and institutions. (Responsibility of Beijing Municipal Administration of Government Logistics to be completed by the end of 2022)

14. Select five units from supermarket chains, five units from restaurants and take-out, and two units from e-commerce platforms to evaluate the usage, substitution, and recycling of disposable plastic shopping bags, plastic bags, disposable plastic straws, plastic coffee stirring sticks, plastic cutlery (knife, fork, and spoon), plastic lunch boxes, plastic fillers, and other disposable plastic products. Pilot the reporting system to promote the implementation of the enterprises' environmental protection responsibility. (Responsibility of Beijing Municipal Commerce Bureau to be completed by the end of 2022)

15. Around the use and recycling of non-degradable plastic bags, disposable plastic woven bags, adhesive tapes, the number of recyclable express packaging applications and the total number of recycling, etc., carry out a pilot report on the postal and express shipping industry in 2022, covering most of the city's major express shipping companies, and driving the entire industry chain in plastic reduction. (Responsibility of Beijing Municipal Postal Administration to be completed by the end of 2022).”

The reporting system for plastic-heavy companies will facilitate efficient plastic reduction by monitoring key links and leading companies in the industry, promoting them to measure, disclose and actively publish their plastic usage to the society, achieving common supervision and reflecting their main responsibility. IPE is continuously following up on the environmental performance of many companies nationwide, which also includes plastic usage. We will pay attention to the disclosure of relevant information from companies and institutions and continue to collect and organize it to help all obtain information conveniently and jointly promote source reduction, plastic recycling, and reuse.

4. Strengthen the scientific and technological support of plastic pollution control: is biodegradable plastic a main substitute in the future?

The special attention to biodegradable plastics stems from the fact that the urban and rural garbage collection, removal, and disposal mechanisms were very unsound back then. The resulting white pollution caused by non-degradable disposable foam dinnerware and ultra-thin plastic packaging bags severely affected the urban and rural environment.

However, whether biodegradable plastic packaging should be the main solution needs further differentiation and discussion. Biodegradable plastics are divided into biodegradable plastics, compostable plastics, photodegradable plastics, thermal-oxo degradable plastics, etc. Among them, the degradability of photodegradable or thermal-oxo degradable plastics is controversial. First of all, complete degradation requires temperature, humidity, and other conditions. Some degradable plastics are difficult to degrade in the natural environment, which often has public cognitive bias. Meanwhile, it may also produce microplastic problems. In terms of cost and supply, the conditions for large-scale applications are not yet available.

In addition, there are a series of key problems such as aging, missing and lagging standards, weak regulations, mixed products, and unknown recycling and disposal methods for biodegradable plastics. Biodegradable plastics play a key role in plastic alternatives and reflect environment-friendly features and should be effectively combined with the sorting and recycling system to ensure that they can be truly and effectively degraded. The establishment of the plastic recycling system is the true way to solve the plastic pollution problem, not just rely on a certain material or technology.

In short, to implement Beijing's new regulations, we should pay attention to plastic source reduction, build and improve the plastic recycling system starting from the express shipping industry, clarify plastic recycling-related standards, realize plastic reduction in the full life cycle of product design from consumption to disposal, etc., and jointly promote plastic pollution control through multi-level participation to achieve green and low-carbon development.

(This article is based on an interview in "News Daily Talk" on Beijing News Radio, with some additions, deletions, and edits.)

Translated with www.DeepL.com/Translator (free version) and revised by Chase Wang.

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