

PLASTIC GIANTS POLLUTING THROUGH THE BACK DOOR

THE CASE FOR A REGULATORY
SUPPLY-CHAIN APPROACH TO STOP PLASTIC
PELLET POLLUTION IN THE EU



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SUMMARY

The report produced by Surfrider Foundation Europe in collaboration with the Rethink Plastic alliance and the Break Free From Plastic Europe movement puts the spotlight on a massive source of pollution which is damaging biodiversity and threatening local communities: **plastics pellets**.

Pellets are the raw material used for plastic products' manufacture. Their lentil-sized dimensions make them easily spilled, wherever in the supply chain they are handled. They are the **second most significant source of microplastic pollution of our ocean**.

Through five case studies, this report exposes the **consequences** of plastic production related pollution on the environment and on human lives, detailing for each case the reaction of the citizens and local associations to the pollution, and the response of the responsible companies.

The five case studies demonstrate the great **diversity** of the pollution contexts and patterns and highlight how **broad** the problem is at the European level as they concern different countries - Belgium, Denmark, France, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain and Sweden - and how **massive** the pollution is.

The five stories show how much the industry and its **voluntary initiative** Operation Clean Sweep **have failed** to reduce plastic pellet pollution and how seriously local communities are calling for urgent legal measures to hold companies accountable.

The case studies in this report underline **why the EU should take urgent regulatory action** to stop pellet pollution which add up to the plastic pollution of already severely polluted water bodies and seas in Europe.

5 RECENT CASE STUDIES ACROSS EUROPE



MAIN FINDINGS

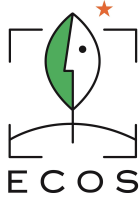
The five case studies exposed in the report show that **pellet pollution continues to occur on a large scale as part of a structural problem**:

- Non-corrective actions, mere declarations and non-controlled best practices from the industry have proven to be unsuccessful in the fight against pellet pollution
- They prove that applying a series of measures to prevent pellet pollution should not be an option given to the plastic chain but should be made compulsory by law and strictly enforced.

Pellet pollution adds to the estimated 12 million tonnes of plastics that end up in the ocean every year. With plastic production projected to double by 2035 and to almost quadruple by 2050, these case studies plead irrefutably for **regulatory measures that put an end to pellet releases once and for all**.

- ✘ **Pellet pollution is pervasive and recurrent and involves a large diversity of actors along the plastic production and distribution chain:** transporters, pellet producers and transformers: it requires a large-scale approach at continent level.
- ✘ Beyond the visible pollution affecting some areas after a spill, an accident or caused through continuous production, **pellets are quickly and widely spreading into new areas:** pellets found on the beach, along waterways or in the streets are only the tip of the iceberg.
- ✘ **Once in the environment, clean-ups remain futile:** they are useful in monitoring pollution and identifying pollution sources, but they do not address pollution at source, are also expensive, have the potential to further damage the environment and require a lot of human and technological resources: only way to progress on this issue is to prevent pellet spills from occurring in the first place.
- ✘ **Nurdles constitute a persistent and long-lasting form of pollution** which endangers the biodiversity present for decades, and severely impacts the marine environment and water bodies. They often impact zones of high biodiversity value: **their massive impacts justify taking robust legal measures**.
- ✘ **The impacts and implications of pellet pollution are multiple and cannot be limited to a local pollution issue.** Pellet pollution is interlinked with other causes of the global destruction of the environment, as some pellet production plants rely on fracked shale gas extracted in the United States and shipped to Europe: **pellet production and related pollution contribute to methane and CO2 emissions and to worsening pollution caused by plastics** and are in total contradiction with existing legislation which aims at curbing plastic use and reducing emissions.
- ✘ In almost all cases, **coastal communities are left to deal with the pollution** as most often industry players blame each other with no one assuming responsibility for the pollution. While the plastics industry has long blamed citizens for the plastic problem and pointed to incorrect disposal and weak waste management in order to explain the plastic crisis. The cases exposed in the report show how far this narrative fall apart when it comes to plastic pellets: **with plastic pellet pollution, the industry holds full responsibility**.
- ✘ The case studies exposed in the report are all recent cases, which proves that **while the situation is not new, it still continues to be out of control today**, despite repeated declarations from the plastics giants that everything is going in the right direction.

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RETHINK PLASTIC

Rethink Plastic, part of the Break Free From Plastic movement, is an alliance of leading European NGOs working towards ambitious EU policies on plastics. It brings together the Center for International Environmental Law (CIEL), ClientEarth, Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA), European Environmental Bureau (EEB), European Environmental Citizen's Organisation for Standardisation (ECOS), Greenpeace, Seas At Risk, Surfrider Foundation Europe, and Zero Waste Europe. Together they represent thousands of active groups, supporters and citizens in every EU Member State working towards a future free from plastic pollution.

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#breakfreefromplastic is a global movement envisioning a future free from plastic pollution made up of 1,400 organisations from across the world demanding massive reductions in single-use plastic and pushing for lasting solutions to the plastic pollution crisis.

REFERENCES

Surfrider Foundation Europe, Rethink Plastic alliance (November 2020). [Plastic giants polluting through the back door: the case for a regulatory supply-chain approach to pellet pollution. Full Report.](#)

EIA, Fidra, FFI, Rethink Plastic alliance (December 2019). [Our Ocean needs actions not promises.](#)

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