

Plastic waste and disposable plastic in Azerbaijan

Review and recommendations

Plastic packaging waste is one of the main sources of environmental pollution. One of the aspects complicating the situation is the fact that plastic waste does not decompose in nature for hundreds of years, and its amount grows every year. According to studies, improper handling of this waste leads to its penetration into the deep layers of agricultural soils, slowing down the natural development of plants and reducing the crop yields, and all this leads to pollution of the environment and water bodies. On the other hand, the toxic smoke generated by burning these wastes leads to air pollution. That is why eliminating the negative impact of plastic waste on nature is considered a priority task in the field of environmental protection. In the relevant sections of the Action Plan for 2019-2020 to reduce the negative environmental impact of plastic packaging waste in the Republic of Azerbaijan, approved by Presidential Decree No. 935 of February 7, 2019, the improvement of the legislative framework, as well as the study and analysis of international experience in the field of plastic packaging waste management were taken into account. As a result of the implementation of this Action Plan, the Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan "On Amendments to the Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan "On Environmental Protection" came into force on November 26, 2020, which prohibits the import, production, sale and distribution of plastic bags up to 15 microns thick, as well as disposable plastic mixing sticks, forks, spoons, plates and glasses among consumers in trade, catering and other service facilities. In this regard, relevant amendments were made to the Code of Administrative Offenses of the Republic of Azerbaijan. In addition, the Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Azerbaijan № 28 dated February 2, 2021 was adopted to consider as a separate type of product (which means this product is sold in stores for money) light polyethylene bags with or without handles, with a thickness of 15 to 50 microns, designed for transportation of goods and products by consumers (customers), when providing trade, public-food, household and other types of services (works). According to the results of surveys conducted among large retail chains regarding this approach, which is being implemented from 2023, a 40-69% reduction in the use of plastic bags has been established ("Tam Store" - 50%, "Grand Mart" - 50%, "AL

Market" - 69%, "Neptun Supermarket" - 40%, "Megastore" - 40%, supermarket "RAHAT" - 46%), which indicates the effectiveness of the implemented measures.

Nevertheless, based on the monitoring and cleanup work carried out by the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources and local utility companies, it is evident, that plastic waste from single-use plastic continues to dominate pollution, especially in coastal areas. Therefore, as in international practice, it is necessary to expand the list of plastic products whose circulation is restricted in our country, apply legal responsibility in this area and take measures to expand the circular economy.

According to the United Nations Environment Program, 19-23 million tons of plastic waste are released into aquatic ecosystems every year, polluting lakes, rivers, seas and oceans, and if the if serious action is not taken, this number will triple by 2040, as will greenhouse gas emissions from plastic, which are projected to account for 15% of total CO2 emissions by 2050.

Under the European Union's June 5 2019 Directive on Reducing the Environmental Impact of Certain Plastic Products, other types of single-use plastic products, including plastic drink straws, plastic ear buds with cotton tips, plastic coasters and balloon sticks, have been added to the list of banned products in the EU. In addition, switching to clip-on lids is one of the creative strategies used to reduce plastic waste and the promotion of recycling. To this end, as July this year, the import of single-use plastic beverage containers of up to 3 liters without attached caps has been banned in the European Union. The aim of this decision is to prevent plastic bottle caps from becoming separate waste and to increase recycling. It is worth noting that our local companies trading with these countries have already started preparing for the application of this technology.

Local businesses and entrepreneurs in Azerbaijan trading with EU countries have been using creative methods to reduce, reuse and recycle plastic waste for years, including increasing the use of alternative materials, especially in the wake of EU bans. Thanks to these approaches, Azerbaijan has made significant steps towards reducing the negative impact on the environment, increasing economic efficiency and strengthening social responsibility.

Currently, representatives of the private sector in Azerbaijan are closely cooperating with the state authorities in this area and are interested in measures implemented reduce the negative environmental impact of plastic. Such cooperation also ensures the implementation of joint projects on environmental protection and expansion of environmental education activities. Dissemination of such positive initiatives in our country is also of great importance for accelerating the application of environmentally friendly technologies.

In this regard, it is necessary to amend the legislation of Azerbaijan in order to stimulate the production of alternative materials with less environmental impact and to create legal and economic framework for the development of this sphere. These changes are crucial for ensuring environmental sustainability and economic development of our country, as well as for the fulfillment of international obligations.

At the same time, environmental education, reduction of plastic waste and information campaigns on the value of recycling are essential. These measures will ensure the active participation of all segments of society in environmental protection and lay the foundation for the sustainable development of our country.

In view of the above, our joint proposals with the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources for a list of plastic products banned for distribution in accordance with global standards, such as beverage straws, plastic coasters and sticks for balloons, plastic earmuffs with cotton buds, and single-use containers up to three liters with lids that are not attached to the container are currently under approval by the relevant organizations.

It is assumed that as the plastic packaging waste recycling system improves and becomes more efficient, a new market for raw materials will be created, the use of alternative packaging methods will increase, and a favorable environment for recycling will be created for potential investors and entrepreneurs. These processes will be accompanied by improvement of the regulatory framework and strengthening of the recycling market based on modern technologies using international experience.

In the long term, significant improvements will be achieved in the recycling of plastic waste, which will reduce the generation of this waste and increase the use of alternative means of packaging and significantly reduce the negative impact on the environment. At the same time, once an effective management system in this area is established, the raw materials market of the recycling sector will become even more attractive to local entrepreneurs and investors. This will contribute to accelerating economic development and at the same time preserving the ecological balance in our country.

Overview of available types of single-use plastics, including applications and types of polymers used

Disposable plastics are widely used in household, industry, agriculture, medicine, etc. Plastic products for transportation or packaging of goods (plastic bags, stoppers, caps, lids, caps and other plastic products for closure), food and kitchen utensils, food and kitchen utensils (forks, knives, plates, glasses, drinking straws), other household, hygiene or toiletry items, plastic bottles, boxes, etc.

According to the current legislation, from January 1, 2021 in Azerbaijan prohibits plastic bags up to 15 microns thick, and from July 1 - the production and import by entrepreneurs of disposable plastic forks, spoons, knives, mixing sticks, plates and glasses, as well as their sale to consumers in trade, catering and other service facilities or use during service.

In order to control compliance with the legislation, the State Service for Antimonopoly Control and Consumer Market Control under the Ministry of Economy prepares a relevant Action Plan, within the framework of which control activities will be carried out.

The State Service for Antimonopoly Regulation and Consumer Market Control calls on business entities to comply with the requirements of current legislation when placing these products on the consumer market.

Serious liability measures are envisaged for non-compliance with the requirements of the legislation. For such actions, plastic materials that are the subject of administrative offense are confiscated, officials are fined from AZN 1,000 to AZN 1,500 and legal entities from AZN 3,000 to AZN 4,000.

Overview of the availability of alternatives to single-use plastics by type of application

Following the decisions made in 2020 to restrict the use of single-use plastic in the country, entrepreneurs' interest in producing and importing alternatives to these products in the the country has further increased. A competitive environment has been created for the production of goods from paper materials. The Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment receives proposals to establish bioplastic production in the country.

Following the decision to initially restrict the use of single-use plastics, products that replace them (bioplastics) are being imported into the country. Currently, new legislative projects related to the expansion of the list of banned single-use plastics are being coordinated with the relevant institutions.

Public opinion on ending single-use plastic: what types of plastic do consumers consider important and why?

Consumers are generally satisfied with decisions to restrict the import, production and use of single-use plastics for household , goods and products. However, they consider it important to have alternative products available to replace them. 72.7 % of respondents about the opinion of market network representatives do not want to ban single-use plastic bags used for storing goods and products.

Recommendations to reduce the production, export, import and use of single-use plastics, taking into account sectors of use and the availability of safe alternatives

Suggestions from market network representatives:

- Increased public education, availability of paper and cloth packaging;
- more intensive implementation of measures to inform people in this area;
- expansion of production of bioplastic products (consumer bags made of corn starch);
- replacing plastic with eco-materials;
- application of certain incentives to reduce the cost of cloth and paper bags
- application of economic instruments to reduce purchase prices for eco- and biodegradable bags.

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