



CONCEPT NOTE
73rd session of the UN General Assembly (UNGA 73)
European Commission - UN Environment Side Event
Fighting Plastic Pollution: A Race to the Top

Event overview and objectives

Plastic pollution has risen to the top of the global environmental agenda in 2018. To address the growing amount of plastic litter in oceans and seas, the European Commission recently adopted the European Strategy for Plastics in a Circular Economy and proposed Europe-wide legislation to tackle single-use plastics and lost or abandoned fishing gear. The Ocean Plastics Charter was endorsed by the Leaders of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom and the European Union at the G7 Summit in Charlevoix (Canada) in June. Also in June, Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India announced the country would eliminate all single-use plastic by 2022. This year also marks the tenth anniversary of a plastic bags ban in Rwanda. These are just a few examples of initiatives by governments around the globe to address plastics mismanagement.

To harness this positive momentum, the European Commission and UN Environment are jointly convening an event at the UN Headquarters in New York with the objective of inspiring new commitments to reduce plastic waste, exploring innovative ways to redesign production and consumption habits around the world and creating a more circular economy.

The event will look at concrete government actions and industry partnerships that make the plastics system more circular, including reducing unnecessary plastic use, boosting sustainable consumption and product design, increasing recyclability, promoting recycled content in plastics products, creating effective waste management solutions, and reducing leakage of plastics into the environment.

Global leaders will have the opportunity to showcase their national initiatives, learn from each other, commit to fight together against plastic pollution and join in a '*race to the top*'. One of the main objectives of the event is to invite governments around the world to join a Global Plastics Platform, to be managed by UN Environment. The aim of the Platform is to encourage governments to take part in the race by demonstrating and reporting on their actions, to facilitate innovative policy solutions using scientific data, and to engage citizens through public awareness campaigns and educational efforts. The European Commission will present its Plastics Strategy and Single Use Plastics legislation to 'start the race'. The Platform members will build on the efforts made by the European Union, the G7, the UN Environment Assembly and other existing international alliances and coalitions.

Organizing partners

UN Environment and the European Commission

Format of the event

The side event will last 1 hour and 30 minutes, including keynote speeches, a panel discussion with an independent moderator and presentation of next steps:

- Welcome and Introduction by the UN Secretary General António Guterres (invited) (5')
- Opening speeches by European Commission's First Vice-President Frans Timmermans (5') and by UN Environment's Executive Director Erik Solheim (5')
- Keynote speech by celebrity speaker (Sir David Attenborough invited) (5')

- Introduction by an independent moderator of a curated high level panel debate with representatives of government and industry, including questions from the audience (60')
- Keynote speech by Dr. Sylvia Earle (5')
- Closing remarks (5')

Participants

The event targets a high-level audience including Heads of State or Government, decision makers from governments and the private sector as well as financial institutions and civil society (the expected number of participants is 250 - 500).

Background information

Plastic is an important material in our economy and daily lives. But the way many products are currently designed, produced, used and discarded leads to both environmentally harmful plastic waste and economic waste. Single-use plastic products are particularly problematic in this respect.

The scale of the challenge is huge. 500 billion plastics bags are used each year. One million plastic bottles are purchased every minute. Between 5 and 13 million tons of plastics end up in our oceans every year. But only 14% of plastic packaging is collected for recycling.

Plastic does not respect national borders. It blows through our cities and across the countryside, it flows along our rivers, floats around our oceans, washes up on our beaches, kills our wildlife and finds its way into our food chain through the fish and seafood that we eat. We must act together, globally, to fix this problem.

The world needs to move urgently towards a more resource-efficient and circular approach to plastics. Our citizens are calling for action. Parts of the plastics industry are already changing their approach. But governments need to help them as well as consumers and push them in the right direction, where necessary through legislation.

The plastics value chain is complex. Rethinking and improving its functioning requires greater cooperation between government, industry, and consumers. Innovation and investment are needed.

International efforts are gathering pace. The United Nations, the G20, the G7, the European Union, and many national and local governments are taking action, and round the world, the circular economy concept is gaining increasing importance.

An important contribution to the 2030 Agenda can be provided through action on plastics. By switching to sustainable consumption and production patterns and improving waste prevention and recycling we can reduce greenhouse gas emissions and prevent marine litter. Action on plastics will help to meet the Sustainable Development Goals, including:

