

July 4, 2022

Ministry of Environment and Climate Change Strategy
CleanBC Plastics Action Plan
plastics@gov.bc.ca

Re: Preventing Single-Use and Plastic Waste in British Columbia – Intentions Paper

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the Intentions Paper: Preventing Single-Use and Plastic Waste in British Columbia (B.C.). Single-use plastics, which are used for a short period of time and then discarded, have created a major pollution problem. The ocean is filling up with plastic trash - negatively impacting the health and well being of marine animals such as fish, birds, turtles, and whales. It is even entering the human food chain in the form of microplastics. To address this issue, it is critical that government introduce policy that reduces plastic pollution in the environment.

Surfrider Foundation Canada (SFC) acknowledges the achievements the Province of B.C. has made in recent years to address plastic pollution. Whether through the creation of new plastic pollution prevention policy, expanding Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) regulation to include more single-use plastic items or by supporting coastal cleanup of marine debris, the Province has demonstrated leadership in reducing plastic pollution. SFC is supportive of the proposed regulations to prevent single-use and plastic waste while encouraging the transition to more reusable options and acknowledges this Intentions Paper as a strong step in the right direction. However, there are several key considerations that need to be made when addressing single-use plastics, and plastic pollution more broadly in the province.

SFC has organized its comments in two categories:

- General feedback on the Intentions Paper and single-use and plastic pollution in B.C.
- Specific feedback on the proposed waste prevention regulation

General feedback on the Intentions Paper and single-use and plastic pollution in B.C.

Single-use plastics are the tip of the plastics ice-berg

On page 2, the Intentions Paper states “single-use and disposable items account for almost all the top twelve most collected items from beach cleanups in B.C.” While this statement is accurate when considering shoreline cleanups that are organized by the Great Canadian Shoreline Cleanup (GCSC)¹, it fails to point out that the majority of these cleanup events typically occur in highly populated areas of the province, such as Southern Vancouver Island and the Lower Mainland and reflect debris that primarily escapes municipal waste management programs. As a result, this statement is misleading, suggesting that single-use and disposable plastics are the dominant form of plastic pollution in B.C. However, this is far from the case. Early results² from the Clean Coast Clean Waters initiative, the province-wide shoreline cleanup project that occurred in 2021 and 2022 and was funded by the Province, demonstrates that when the scope of analysis is expanded more broadly,

¹ <https://shorelinecleanup.org/impact-visualized-data>

² <https://thenarwhal.ca/bc-tour-boat-operators-clean-up-ocean-debris-coronavirus/>

the amount of single-use plastics materials collected by cleanup projects is substantially less when compared to other categories of plastic waste, such as fishing and aquaculture gear. Similarly, cigarette butts are the most common type of plastic debris found at GCSC cleanups every year. Statements like the one above detract attention from arguably more impactful categories of plastic pollution in B.C. that also need to be addressed.

Challenges with EPR prioritizing reuse

On page 5, the Intentions Paper discusses how EPR forms a pillar of the Province's approach to plastic pollution prevention. More specifically, it states how "EPR compels producers to follow the waste prevention hierarchy. This means that producers are expected to prioritize reduction and reuse over recycling." Theoretically speaking, this is the expected outcome with EPR policy. However, in practice, this has not been significantly demonstrated. Alternatively, there is evidence that EPR programs with established reuse systems are seeing a decline in the use of those materials. For example, the beer container EPR program operated by BC Brewers' Recycled Container Collection Council (BRCCC) has seen an approx. 80% decline in the use of industry standard bottle and proprietary glass refillable containers over 10 years, while the use of single-use aluminum cans has almost doubled.³ In this example, it's clear to see that the BRCCC program is effectively managing the materials that enter the waste stream, but is not influencing the packaging choices of its producer members upstream to use refillable options.

As the Province considers ways of prioritizing reduction and reuse over recycling, it will be important to take a close look at the Recycling Regulation as it is currently structured to determine if it will effectively achieve its reduction and reuse ambitions for materials that it covers. Instead of *compelling* producers to prioritize reduction and reuse, there may be the need to place *requirements* on producers, so they *must* prioritize reduction and reuse. Alternatively, it may be fair to accept that EPR is not the most effective tool to drive producers to prioritize reduction and reuse and explore other policies (similar to this proposed waste prevention regulation) that can establish a landscape where more reduction and reuse will occur.

Making the circular economy accessible for all

It is clear that the proposed waste prevention regulation puts forward actions that are aimed at moving B.C. to a circular economy approach for waste management. As noted on page 5, in a circular economy, recycling is a vital step. However, it is not something everyone currently has equal access to across B.C., particularly in more rural communities (which are oftentimes more greatly impacted by plastic pollution in general as they lack the access and resources to eliminate it). As the Province implements this and other future waste regulations, it will be important to ensure that all communities have equal and effective access to reuse and recycling services.

Creating a level playing field for reusable containers and the marine environment

The proposed waste prevention regulation aims to promote a shift to durable reusable options by banning certain material-types. The intentions paper outlines that durable reusable containers are an alternative that exists for these materials, alongside other easily recyclable and presumably single-use plastics, aluminum, glass, and fibre-based containers. It can be considered that there is not enough incentive for businesses to promote reuse and refill systems and instead use available single-use alternatives. This outcome makes it very difficult for the businesses that do switch to reusable containers (which carry higher costs/deposits) to compete with other businesses that choose not to. To fully promote a shift to durable reusable options, it will be important for the Province to provide businesses and consumers with the education to understand how these systems work and

³<https://envirobeerbc.ca/bdl-annual-product-stewardship-reports/>

provide incentives for businesses to get on board. Furthermore, making sure the goal of shifting to durable reusables is achieved is of critical importance for the marine environment. While the proposed regulation will ban certain types of plastic packaging that are problematic for recycling systems in B.C., it doesn't solve the problem that the easier to recycle plastics that can continue to be used may be poorly managed and end up polluting the marine environment, where they have damaging effects.

Specific feedback on the proposed waste prevention regulation

Checkout bags

SFC fully supports the intention to ban plastic checkout bags in conjunction with fees on single-use paper bags. However, there are aspects below that can be improved:

- The material type of reusable bags could be constructed from a natural fibre. The proposed regulation currently requires a reusable bag to be able to withstand a minimum of 100 washes. Given that there is evidence that hundreds to thousands of microplastic fibres are released when synthetic fabrics are washed⁴, using synthetic fibres in reusable bags can have a detrimental impact on the marine environment if wastewater treatment facilities are not capable of filtering these out.
- Include produce bags in the list of proposed restrictions. These single-use plastic bags are typically very lightweight and not durable, reducing their suitability for reuse options. They also pose the same hazards in the marine environment as plastic checkout bags. As with the checkout bag, there are many viable alternatives that can be utilized. Furthermore, although flexible plastics such as plastic checkout bags and produce bags are accepted in the Recycle BC recycling program, only a small amount of these are recovered each year (e.g. 24% in 2020⁵).

Foodservice Accessories

SFC supports the direction to move to a by-request requirement for disposable foodservice accessories (e.g., utensils, drinking straws, condiment sachets, napkins, cup lids) regardless of material type. We also support the direction for bulk refills if dine in or when customers bring their own containers. SFC encourages setting strong standards for what counts as reusable to ensure high environmental impact and that easily disposed items will not be used as substitutes.

Problematic plastic food packaging

SFC supports the direction to ban foodservice ware made from problematic plastics (i.e., polystyrene foam, PVC, and compostable plastics). SFC supports the direction to ban plastics with oxo-degradable additives. By banning these materials, it is expected that there will be more incentive to use durable reusable options. However, there are problematic plastics noted below that should be addressed, as well as some specific considerations regarding the language used in the Intentions Paper:

⁴<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/filters-on-laundry-machines-lead-to-significant-cut-in-microfibre-pollution-ontario-study-finds-1.6241689>

⁵<https://recyclebc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/RecycleBC-2020AR-FINAL.pdf>

- Multi-laminate pouches and other soft plastics that are not plastic bags and overwrap, classified as other flexible plastic packaging (OFPP) by the Recycle BC program, currently have no recycling solution. As a result, they are recovered into engineered fuel, an engineered energy product that is a direct replacement for traditional non-renewable resources, such as coal, in industrial settings. While this is better than managing this material through landfill, it is clear to see that these single-use plastic packaging items are not effectively recycled in B.C. Additionally, as previously stated, the recovery of flexible plastics, which includes OFPP, by the Recycle BC recycling program has been very low in recent years (24% in 2020, 22% in 2019). Arguably, this could be due to the fact that these materials are recycled at depot only, which poses a barrier for convenient recycling. SFC acknowledges that the Province has noted including flexible plastics in future provincial action (page 17). However, it is clear to see that these materials are currently not being effectively collected and recycled. SFC urges the Province to address OFPP materials in this proposed waste prevention regulation.
- It is important to define what is considered a “durable reusable bag/item/container.” SFC is concerned that producers, in an effort to avoid investment in quality reusable containers and take-back systems, will use bags/items/containers that are more durably rigid and could be reused, but are still discarded by consumers after a single-use.

Future actions

As previously stated, the Province should consider addressing OFPP materials in this proposed waste prevention regulation.

Compliance and measuring success

On page 2, the Intentions Paper states how the Province is proposing this new waste prevention regulation “to reduce the impacts of single-use and plastic waste on the environment.” As previously noted, the Intentions Paper also states how single-use plastics are commonly found at shoreline cleanup events. As a result, it’s fair to assume that by moving B.C. to a circular economy approach, the desired outcome of the proposed regulation is to see a reduction in pollution in the environment, which includes the marine environment. However, the proposed measures identified on page 20 to determine and monitor effectiveness of the regulation are based on consumption patterns of these materials by business upstream and through waste composition studies downstream, presumably at landfills. The outlined measures do not include specific monitoring of pollution patterns in the marine environment (e.g. shoreline).

To effectively evaluate prevention of plastic pollution in the marine environment, plastic policy interventions require monitoring programs tailored to their specific requirements that look at pollution patterns in this particular space. As policy interventions are introduced, there is a temptation to use citizen science data to evaluate them. While citizen science has been identified as a legitimate source of information for various purposes, including monitoring policy effectiveness, research⁶ has shown that there are acute limitations to using pre-existing citizen science datasets generated by organizations that collected the data for other reasons than evaluating specific policies. The Province should consider developing a monitoring program for this proposed regulation that is aimed at measuring its impact at reducing single-use plastic pollution in the B.C. marine environment. Furthermore, careful consideration needs to be given as to whether or not there is a

⁶<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0308597X20309660>



possibility that citizen science data could meet the specific monitoring requirements of the proposed regulation.

Once again, thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on this Intentions Paper. We applaud the progressive efforts being taken by the Province to help reduce the impact of single-use and plastic waste and look forward to continued work that helps protect B.C.'s beautiful natural environment from plastic pollution.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Lucas Harris". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "L" and "H".

Lucas Harris
Executive Director, Surfrider Foundation Canada

About Surfrider Foundation Canada

The Surfrider Foundation is a nonprofit grassroots organization dedicated to the protection and enjoyment of our world's ocean, waves and beaches for all people through a powerful activist network. Surfrider Foundation Canada (SFC) is part of the global Surfrider community of international affiliates located in countries around the world. SFC has three local volunteer-run chapters based in Tofino/Ucluelet (Pacific Rim Chapter), Victoria (Vancouver Island Chapter) and Vancouver and two school clubs at the University of Victoria and Ucluelet Secondary School. SFC focuses on several key environmental issues, including plastics reduction, ocean protection, beach access, coastal preservation and water quality.