

The EU Directive on Single-Use Plastic (SUP)

by
Sustainability and Circular Economy Lab
University of Gastronomic Sciences of Pollenzo



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Practicality and multifunctionality, as well as its relatively low cost, make plastics a ubiquitous material in everyday life.

It offers numerous advantages for certain applications: it is easy to mould, does not corrode easily and decomposes slowly (Shen & Worrell, 2014). Because of these intrinsic characteristics, it is one of the most widely used materials for packaging since it was invented.

The considerably negative impact of plastic waste on our health and the environment is increasingly evident. According to a study by Legambiente, 84% of the waste found on Italian beaches in 2020 is plastic and most of it is mainly disposable items (Legambiente, 2020).

One of the primary problems with these alarming figures is that disposable products are designed to be used only once and for a short period of time, and then thrown away.

Because of the need to find more sustainable solutions, the European Union realised that it needed to establish a legal framework that could effectively reduce the adverse impacts of spreading plastics that are not properly recycled.

In this regard, the EU decided to address the problem of single-use plastics by implementing a regulatory intervention that aims to combat the pollution, especially at sea, caused by their dispersal.

The *Single Use Plastic Directive*, whose acronym is SUP, came into force on 3 July 2019, leaving two years for Member States to adapt to the new measures. Therefore, by 3 July 2021, EU Member States should have transposed the directive into their national legislation.

The SUP Directive is therefore only applicable to those products that can be defined as single-use, which are usually thrown away after only one use or which have been designed to last only one use. According to the Directive, a "single-use plastic product" is defined as "*a product which is made wholly or partly of plastics and which is not conceived, designed or placed on the market to undergo multiple trips or rotations during its lifetime by being returned to a manufacturer for refilling or reused for the same purpose for which it was conceived*".

When sustainable alternatives exist that are readily available and accessible to everyone, plastic single-use products cannot be placed on the market in the EU Member States. For single-use plastic products for which there are no viable alternatives, each individual EU country should develop measures to considerably reduce their use.

Different measures have been applied to different products. More specifically, the items that are banned by the EU directive are the following: cotton buds; cutlery, plates, straws and stirrers; balloons and balloon sticks; food containers; beverage cups; beverage containers; cigarette butts; plastic bags; packages and wrappers; wet wipes and sanitary ware (European Commission, 2020).

For other types of single-use plastic products, the European Union is working to reduce their use not only through awareness-raising measures or by introducing design and labelling requirements to better inform consumers on how to dispose of packaging, but also by introducing new waste management obligations for producers - the so-called *Extended Producer Responsibility* (EPR).

As the European Commission points out in the section dedicated to this directive, the ultimate goal of introducing these EU rules is to prevent and reduce the impact of certain plastic products on the environment, in particular the marine environment, and on human health (European Commission, 2021). The SUP Directive can become a starting point for the

transition to a circular economy, where environmentally, socially and economically sustainable solutions and options are developed.

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