

European Union must stop tobacco industry's greenwashing

Tobacco industry: an environmental disaster, from production to post-consumption

The devastating consequences of smoking on public health are well known and documented, as tobacco products are still responsible for more than 700,000 deaths per year in Europe¹. Yet, the disastrous environmental consequences for which the tobacco industry is responsible are less known.

Throughout their whole life cycle, tobacco products are responsible for environmental pollution and degradation, such as deforestation, the poisoning of water, air, and soil with chemicals and microplastic contamination. Each year, more than 4,5 trillion cigarettes are discarded in the environment². Almost all of them have a cellulose acetate filter attached, a poorly degradable plastic additive which can pollute up to 500L of water and which are the second most found-single use plastic items on beaches in the European Union³.

Tobacco industry's greenwashing tactics

In plain contradiction with these facts, tobacco industry multiplies its attempts to present itself as a responsible and environmentally friendly industry. Whether it is through the communication available on the official websites of its main companies⁴ or the extensive promotion and advertising of beach cleaning activities of their product waste by volunteers⁵, the tobacco industry diverts and manipulates the facts. It evades its environmental responsibility while regaining legitimacy with public authorities.

By creating an appearance of respectability, this behaviour jeopardizes several decades of efforts by civil society and governments' efforts to prevent and denounce the devastating health, social, environmental, and economic consequences of tobacco consumption and production. These efforts have notably led to the signature of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) by 180 Parties including the European Union, covering more than 90% of the world population, and aiming at protecting present and future generation from the tobacco industry.

Tobacco waste management: a greenwashing opportunity for the industry

A striking example of greenwashing activities is the role awarded to the tobacco industry in the management of cigarette butts. In application of the polluter-pays principle, the European Union has adopted in 2019 a directive on single-use plastic products, including cigarette filters. Among other obligations, this text will oblige tobacco producers to cover the costs relating to the clean-up, transport and treatment of cigarette butts and Member States to develop awareness raising measures on this matter⁶.

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/health/tobacco/overview_en

² <https://www.who.int/news-room/questions-and-answers/item/q-a-world-no-tobacco-day-2022>

³ <https://www.eea.europa.eu/highlights/new-data-collected-by-citizens>

⁴ <https://www.bat.com/environment>

⁵ <https://tobaccotactics.org/wiki/greenwashing/>

⁶ Directive (EU) 2019/904 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 June 2019 on the reduction of the impact of certain plastic products on the environment

However, without clarification from the European Commission, Member States may entirely delegate to the tobacco industry the management, or part of the management, of its waste. This is already the case in France which has entrusted all tobacco companies, united in an eco-organization called ALCOME, with the management and communication around pollution of its cigarette butts. ALCOME has thus already signed several dozen contracts with local authorities and already takes the opportunity to blame smokers for its pollution⁷.

The European Union must not fall into the tobacco industry's trap

Delegating this environmental mission to the tobacco industry jeopardizes decades of health policy aimed at keeping the tobacco industry away from any public service mission. Such a delegation is in flagrant contradiction with article 5.3 of the FCTC which requires Parties to protect their policies from the interests of the tobacco industry. The role of the tobacco industry should be limited to financing the clean-up and management of cigarette butts. The tobacco industry should not be involved in any way, directly or indirectly, in the management or supervision of cigarette butts the organisation of awareness campaigns on this subject. This should be reserved for an eco-organization entirely independent of the tobacco industry.

We, the undersigned organisations, having already expressed our concerns to the European Commission, call upon Member States of the European Union to address this issue during the next European Environmental Council to be held on June 28. The implementation of international agreements protecting public health and the environment, and in particular the FCTC and its article 5.3., should invite them to refuse this blatant attempt at greenwashing by the tobacco industry.

Organisational signatories:

George Bakhturidze, Director of Tobacco Control Alliance of Georgia

Birgit Beger, President of Smoke Free Partnership

Luke Clancy, Director of TobaccoFree Research Institute of Ireland

Suzanne Gabriels, Belgian Foundation Against Cancer

Pr. Loïc Josseran, President of ACT-Alliance contre le Tabac, France

Danielle Van Kalmthout, Alliance Belge pour une Société sans Tabac

Pr. Yves Martinet, President of Comité National contre le Tabagisme (CNCT)

Raquel Fernández Megina, President of Nofumadores.org

Dr. Francisco Rodriguez Lozano, President of ENSP ("European Network for Smoking and Tobacco Prevention")

Luciano Ruggia, Director of Association suisse pour la prévention du tabagisme

To see all the signatories, please go to : <https://alliancecontreletabac.org/2022/05/30/european-union-must-stop-tobacco-industrys-greenwashing/>

⁷ <https://alcome.eco/>