



ASH Scotland, Keep Scotland Beautiful (KSB) and the Marine Conservation Society (MCS) share a growing concern regarding the impact of smoking related litter and, specifically, single-use plastic cigarette filters, and are now working together to tackle the issue.

Date of statement: November 2020



The Problem:

Cigarette litter is one of the most visible and prevalent forms of litter throughout Scotland from its beautiful beaches and parks to busy streets and roadsides.

Cigarette stubs have consistently been in the top 5 items picked up by Marine Conservation Society volunteers during the last five Great British Beach Clean events.

In their annual surveys KSB found that 63% of sites audited had cigarette stubs present, and this was even higher in urban areas. The International Coastal Clean-Up 2019 report, to which MCS and KSB contributed data, revealed that cigarette stubs were the top item found by volunteers around the world ahead of even food wrappers and plastic bottles.

Nearly 3.65 billion cigarette stubs are discarded each year in Scotland. We are concerned that there is a general lack of awareness that part of the stub is a plastic filter and should therefore be considered a single-use plastic.

The plastic pollution from the filters is estimated to weigh 600 metric tons, which is enough to fill 50 bin Lorries¹. Cigarette stubs are found to take around 14 years² to degrade, during this time, thousands of chemicals are released³ into the environment as well as micro plastics.⁴

Furthermore, ASH Scotland has long been aware that cigarette filters do not benefit health, although two thirds of smokers think that they do.⁵ Instead they act to make smoke smoother and more palatable. By giving the impression of reduced harm, and by making the experience of smoking less harsh, plastic filters make it easier for young people to take up smoking. ASH Scotland is concerned that the overall health impact of filters is likely to be negative and will act to undermine Scottish Government's aim of creating a tobacco-free generation by 2034.

The Solution

Instead of finding more cost-effective ways to clean-up cigarette stubs, the focus should be on preventing these plastics or any other single-use alternatives from polluting our environment in the first place. The US State of California has a Bill ready for its third reading prohibiting the sale of any single-use filters or plastic devices linked with smoking and to require manufacturers of such components to use materials eligible for local recycling or to offer return and reuse programs.⁶

We would welcome similar legislative ambition from the Scottish Government to tackle this by firstly banning plastic based single-use filters and then reviewing the need for other single-use filters further.

We believe that single-use plastic cigarette filters should be categorised alongside other single-use plastics, like plastic cotton-bud stems, straws and cups as optional consumer choices, and be the subject of appropriate regulatory action.

The European Union, through the Single Use Plastics Directive (“Reduction of the impact of certain plastic products on the environment”), has recognised cigarette stubs as one of the top 10 most commonly found items on our beaches.

Yet single-use cigarette filters have been a neglected element of the plastics and single-use debates and, unlike some other single use plastic items which have been subject to a ban or reduction, cigarettes will only be subject to an Extended Producer Responsibility scheme which will contribute to covering clean-up costs. A YouGov Poll found that 72% of Scots think plastic cigarette filters that bring no health benefits should be added to the list of single-use plastic items being considered for a ban (only 6% oppose).⁷

We also believe there is a need for a renewed focus on ensuring the appropriate disposal of smoking-related litter. This could include communications activity at a national level, which raises awareness that filters are single-use plastic items, coupled with behaviour change interventions at a local level.

In the midst of the interlinked Climate and Biodiversity crises, action at every level is needed to recover and protect Scotland’s natural environment.

We are therefore calling on Scottish Government to take world leading legislative action to tackle the negative impacts of plastic single-use cigarette filters and to encourage and support action to ensure the appropriate disposal of smoking related litter from damaging the health of Scotland’s people and environment.

References:

[1] A bin lorry holds between 12–14 tons of rubbish. 600 tons of cigarette butts divided by 12 = 50 bin lorries.

[2] Joly & Coulis 2018 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0956053X17308474> “conventional plastic filters take 7.5–14 years to disappear, in the compost and on the soil surface, respectively...cellulose filters take 2.3–13 years to disappear, in the compost and on the soil surface, respectively”.

[3] <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0269749119364693?via%3Dihub>

[4] Novotny, T.E., Slaughter, E. Tobacco Product Waste: An Environmental Approach to Reduce Tobacco Consumption. Curr Envir Health Rpt 1, 208–216 (2014). <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s40572-014-0016-x>

[5] <https://bmcpublikehealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-015-2643-z>

[6] https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201920200SB424

[7] Figures from YouGov PLC. Total sample size was 1009 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 12th February and 10th March 2019. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all Scottish adults (aged 18+)

