

Position Paper: The need for clear definitions for paper and board-based single-use products

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Standard folding cartons are plastic-free according to **the Single-Use Plastics Directive (European Union's Directive (EU) 2019/904, "SUPD")**. Indeed, paper and board-based single-use products made only from paper and board-based materials are not in the scope of the Directive unless they have a plastic lining or coating the purpose of which is to create a barrier, for example, against moisture or grease. Polymer additives used in paper and board as well as paints (varnishes), inks and adhesives are exempted from being defined as plastic since they do not constitute a main structural component.

Nevertheless, "plastic-free" claims are being inconsistently made for items in the scope of SUPD hence we support the use of clearer harmonised definitions, to avoid confusion in implementation which may hinder innovation whilst creating an unfair competitive landscape.

Reminder of the plastic definition in SUPD

In terms of materials, single-use plastic items are products made wholly or partially from plastic, which are primarily conceived to be used only once. For the purposes of the SUPD 'plastic' means a material consisting of a polymer as defined in point (5) of Article 3 of Regulation (EC) No 1907/2006, to which additives or other substances may have been added, and which can function as a main structural component of the final products, with the exception of natural polymers that have not been chemically modified.

At European guidance level, there is no minimum plastic content in the EU definition of what is considered plastic, although some Member States do apply a threshold percentage.

Challenges encountered.

In some cases, similar types of paints (i.e., varnishes) or dispersion coatings are applied inside and outside the packaging which has created some uncertainty on what is the correct interpretation of the requirements for a structural layer especially as it differs from other Regulations in place. This lack of clarity is leading to the increasing use of alternative standards to demonstrate what could be considered plastic free. This is creating a biased competitive landscape both in terms of how similar products can be marked as containing plastics or not where applicable, how they can be promoted on the market but also in terms of the related single use plastic taxes that may be incurred depending on different interpretation on the plastic-free conditions.

Recommendations for the future

ECMA / ProCarton strongly calls for clear, harmonised, fact and impact-based definitions.

Article 3(43) of the Packaging and Packaging Waste Regulation proposal follows a similar definition for plastics to what is used in the SUPD. Nevertheless, the boundary between the fibre-based packaging categories “paper and cartonboard” and “composite packaging of which the majority is paper/cardboard” is not clear. Low amounts of plastic have no impact on the recycling process of fibre-based packaging and therefore the rationale for defining categories should not only be plastic content.

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