

Energy and Commodities

“Closing the tap” on plastics

Expansión (Spain)

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The pollution of the oceans by plastic is one of the most severe environmental problems facing humanity. This phenomenon has recently come to the fore in public opinion thanks to the distribution of distressing images on the internet and social media. Photographs of marine animals killed by ingestion, suffocation or entanglement have gone viral.

Plastic is an invention that started to be sold in the 1950s. Since then nearly 8.3 billion metric tons of virgin plastics have been produced, with output growing at 8.6% a year, twice as fast as world GDP. Certain characteristics of plastic, such as its resistance to corrosion and its malleability, make it an exceptional material for manufacturing all kinds of products. However, only 9% of plastic waste is recycled, 12% is incinerated and the remaining 79% ends up in landfills or in the natural environment.

The intensive use of plastics, and in particular disposable items, has had a very high cost for the environment. This is because plastic does not biodegrade but breaks up into tiny fragments which are ingested by aquatic animals which in turn are consumed by humans. So-called microplastics are also produced intentionally and form part of certain products such as clothes, cosmetics and personal care articles.

Every year around eight million metric tons of plastic waste are dumped in the sea. If this pace is maintained, it is calculated that by 2050 there could be more pieces of plastic than fish in the ocean. The economic cost of the contamination of the oceans by plastic is estimated at around US\$13 billion a year.

But above all, the implications for our health, the environment and the economy are sufficient reason to seek a solution. To collect the plastic from the oceans is almost impossible. But preventing its reaching the sea is an attainable objective. One way to do it is by promoting investment in waste management infrastructure, especially in middle and lower income countries

These investments can be complemented by voluntary strategies to reduce waste and by agreements involving consumers, private sector businesses and governments worldwide. In the private sector, more and more companies are implementing voluntary reduction strategies. At government level, total or partial prohibition of disposable plastic objects or the imposition of charges on manufacturers, sellers or consumers is becoming more and more common.

However, these measures do not change the fact that the greater the population and its income, the greater is the demand for plastics. The long-term solution therefore requires a more far-reaching change in the way we produce, consume and dispose of plastics. We need to adopt a model in which they never become waste. The principles of the “circular economy” can serve as a guide. Starting with designing products that last longer, made with sustainable materials that can be easily recovered. In the “circular economy”, companies commit to produce and sell these types of products, while consumers buy, share, repair and reuse them. Governments for their part offer the incentives and support necessary for businesses and individuals to be able to fit into this kind of economy without being seriously affected. These efforts include, among other things, efficient waste management systems that help recover materials and keep them in the production and consumption cycle.

Creating Opportunities

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Although the reach of the circular economy is still very limited, the efforts being made to eradicate plastic pollution are generating innovation in various fields such as product design, packaging, alternative materials, recycling and energy recovery. In an ideal scenario, new business models and new businesses would be created, fostering a virtuous cycle of sustainability and growth in employment. For businesses, understanding the risks and opportunities involved in the fight against plastic pollution of the oceans constitutes the first step in contributing effectively to resolving this serious problem.

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