

MARINE ENVIRONMENT PROTECTION
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FOLLOW-UP WORK EMANATING FROM THE ACTION PLAN TO ADDRESS MARINE PLASTIC LITTER FROM SHIPS

Increasing momentum to tackle plastic pollution in the marine environment

Submitted by CSC

SUMMARY

<i>Executive summary:</i>	This document requests an update on the steps taken to review the Action Plan to prevent marine plastic litter from ships and progress on the related actions. It also provides a brief update on the broader context of the emerging governance landscape on plastic pollution.
<i>Strategic direction, if applicable:</i>	Not applicable
<i>Output:</i>	Not applicable
<i>Action to be taken:</i>	Paragraph 14
<i>Related documents:</i>	MEPC 75/8/3, MEPC 75/8/4, MEPC 75/INF.23; MEPC 77/8, MEPC 77/8/2, MEPC 77/8/4; MEPC 80/17; PPR 11/13/4; resolutions MEPC.310(73), MEPC.341(77) and MEPC.1/Circ.894

Introduction

1 In 2018, IMO Members adopted the *IMO Action Plan to address marine plastic litter from ships* (resolution MEPC.310(73)). The resolution acknowledges the importance of preventing marine plastic pollution from ships and the contribution IMO can make to delivering the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, particularly in SDG 14.1 (UN General Assembly resolution A/RES/70/1). In recognition of the urgency to address marine plastic litter from ships by 2025, the decision to adopt the plan was followed by a strategy for its implementation. In document MEPC 77/16/Add.1 it was proposed that the Strategy will be monitored and evaluated to ensure that it continues to deliver against its objective and outcomes. In this regard, IMO will carry out a comprehensive review of the Strategy in 2025. In accordance with resolution MEPC.310(73) it was stated that there would also be a review of the Action Plan in 2023.

2 In document MEPC 80/17, at its 80th meeting "the Committee recalled that it had agreed to keep the Action Plan under review, with a view to assessing the effectiveness of the actions within the Action Plan against the intended outcomes in 2023. However, in light of the ongoing work at the PPR Sub-Committee and the Committee's workload at this session, the Committee agreed to defer the review of the Action Plan to MEPC 81."

3 This document makes the case for an update on the review of the Action Plan at this meeting and the sharing of progress to achieve the short, medium and long-term actions stated therein. Such discussion should also consider the broader plans for IMO to tackle new and existing threats related to marine plastic pollution and increase engagement within the ongoing negotiations for a new global instrument on plastic pollution, specifically with regards to plastic pollution from sea-based sources.

Plastic pollution – a planetary threat

4 Plastic pollution is a planetary emergency, intersecting with the climate crisis, biodiversity loss and impact on human health. The total estimated weight of all fish in the ocean is currently around 700 million tonnes.¹ By 2025, there will be an estimated 250 million tonnes of plastic in the oceans.² By 2040, it could be almost 700 million tonnes, and by 2050 the weight of plastic will likely far exceed the weight of all fish in every ocean on earth.³ The GESAMP WG 43 report highlighted that, "sea-based activities and industries contribute to the global burden of marine litter, and that this warrants concern largely because synthetic materials comprise significant portions and components of litter entering the world's oceans from fishing, aquaculture, shipping, ocean dumping and other maritime activities and sources." Yet despite the critical role of the maritime sector in solving this crisis, current actions have fallen short of the necessary level of ambition to adequately curb its impacts.

5 Estimates have suggested that as much as 5.7% of all fishing nets, 8.6% of all traps and 29% of all lines are lost annually.⁴ Regional differences also exist, with fishing gear comprising an estimated 27% of beach litter in Europe, 46% of the floating debris in the Great Pacific Garbage Patch⁵ and, in a study in the North Pacific Ocean, nearly 90% of marine debris intercepted by longline fisheries was ghost gear.⁶ When fishing gear is lost, it continues to catch both target and non-target species – also known as 'ghost-fishing' – entangling and killing threatened and protected marine animals and commercially important fish species.⁷ Lost gear also damages coral reefs and the seabed, while surface abandoned, lost or otherwise discarded fishing gear (ALDFG) presents a significant safety hazard for shipping and maritime activities, such as through propeller entanglement. Once washed ashore, ALDFG blights beaches with plastic litter. Disintegration of ALDFG also contributes to microplastics in the

¹ Bar-On, Y. M., Phillips, R., & Milo, R. (2018). The biomass distribution on Earth. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 115(25), 6506- 6511. Available [here](#).

² Jambeck, J. R. et al., (2015). Plastic waste inputs from land into the ocean. *Science*, 347(6223), 768-771. Available [here](#).

³ Lau, W. W. Y. et al., (2020) Evaluating scenarios toward zero plastic pollution. *Science*, 369, No. 1455. Available [here](#). <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.aba9475>

⁴ Richardson, K., Hardesty, B. D., Vince, J., & Wilcox, C. (2022). Global estimates of fishing gear lost to the ocean each year. *Science Advances*, 8(41). Available [here](#). Richardson, K., Hardesty, B. D., & Wilcox, C. (2019). Estimates of fishing gear loss rates at a global scale: A literature review and meta-analysis. *Fish and Fisheries*, 20(6), 1218–1231. Available [here](#).

⁵ European Commission (2018). New Proposal will Tackle Marine Litter and "Ghost Fishing." Available [here](#). Lebreton, L. et al. (2018). Evidence that the Great Pacific Garbage Patch Is Rapidly Accumulating Plastic (*Sci Rep* 8, 4666). Available [here](#).

⁶ Uhrin, A.V. et al (2020). Relative Abundance of Derelict Fishing Gear in the Hawaii-based Pelagic Longline Fishery Grounds as Estimated from Fishery Observer Data (*Sci Rep* 10, 7767). Available [here](#).

⁷ Convention on Biological Diversity (2016). *Marine Debris: Understanding, Preventing and Mitigating Significant Adverse Impacts on Marine and Coastal Biodiversity* (Report of the Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice, UNEP/CBD/SBSTTA/20/INF/9). Available [here](#). Greenpeace (2006). *Plastic Debris in the World's Oceans*. Available [here](#).

marine environment and on beaches.⁸ Furthermore, ingestion of microplastics has the potential to increase the bioavailability of toxic substances, which is likely to impact all parts of the marine food chain.⁹

6 Beyond fishing gear such as nets, lines and traps, different gear types and their plastic components are known to cause specific and complex environmental and governance challenges for regional fisheries management organizations (RFMOs) and enforcement agencies. For example, between 2016 and 2020, 96,599 drifting fish aggregating devices (FADs) were deployed in the Western Central Pacific Ocean. Investigation of FAD fates showed 44.1% of FAD buoys (with transmitters) were abandoned, 9.6% were retrieved; 6.6% were beached; 18.4% were sunk, appropriated or had a malfunctioning buoy; and 21.3% were deactivated by the fishing company and left drifting, unmonitored at sea.¹⁰

7 Marine plastic pollution occurs from a myriad of sources that have received scant attention in the existing regulatory framework (see document MEPC 77/8/4 and the report from GESAMP WG 43). As an example, annually over 445,000 tonnes of pellets escape the global plastic supply chain and enter the environment.¹¹ As recently as in December 2023, yet another maritime incident aboard the Liberian-flagged **Toconao** ship resulted in thousands of plastic pellets being spilled into the waters off the Portuguese coast with pellets still washing up on Spanish coastlines. The clean-up operation is complex and hampered by resourcing and bureaucratic challenges,¹² ultimately leaving the problem in the oceans to cause environmental harm.

8 This planetary threat requires addressing because plastic and marine life often accumulate in the same oceanic areas, posing challenges to maritime safety, wildlife and human health. In the North Pacific High, sometimes referred to as the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, ocean currents and eddies appear to concentrate plastics and marine life in highly concentrated regions.¹³ In coastal regions, (e.g. Hawaii), nearly 100% of large larval fish and over 95% of floating plastics are concentrated into calm regions of the surface water called slicks, which represents only 8% of the ocean surface, making it extremely difficult to separate life from plastics.¹⁴ Remediation of plastic pollution through clean-ups at a global level would require scaling to an unprecedented level – models have suggested that even 200 vessel-based cleanup devices would not clean the world's oceans in over 100 years of continuous operation. The reality is quite clear – preventative actions along the plastics value chain are the most cost effective and environmentally sound approaches to dealing with plastic pollution. At the point of clean ups and remediation, it is already far too late.¹⁵

⁸ Potential microplastic release from beached fishing gear in Great Britain's region of highest fishing litter density. Available [here](#).

⁹ Mattsson, K., Johnson, E. V., Malmendal, A., Linse, S., Hansson, L.-A., & Cedervall, T. (2017). Brain damage and behavioural disorders in fish induced by plastic nanoparticles delivered through the food chain. *Sci. Rep.* 7:11452. doi: 10.1038/s41598-017-10813-0 Available [here](#) (more references available).

¹⁰ Report on analyses of the 2016/2021 PNA FAD tracking programme. Available [here](#).

¹¹ Oracle Environmental Experts. Pellet supply chain mapping report. Available [here](#).

¹² Euroweekly news. Available [here](#).

¹³ TOC feasibility study. Available [here](#).

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Environmental Investigation Agency and Ocean Care (2023). Clean-ups or Clean-washing? Available [here](#).

9 Governments and stakeholders have been invited to submit updates on research into marine plastic litter and to better understand microplastic pollution from ships in accordance with MEPC.1/Circ.894, but to date there have been a limited number of inputs (see document MEPC 78/INF.15 (Germany)) and a lack of momentum to advance discussion on elements put forward in submissions. An example of this was document MEPC 77/8/1 (FOEI, Greenpeace International, WWF, Pacific Environment and CSC) highlighting the growing concern surrounding microplastic pollution from anti-fouling paints, noting new research which found that 6% of solid anti-fouling coating is lost directly to the sea during its lifetime and that 40% of marine coatings use microplastics as binding agents, with annual input of marine paints to European waters estimated at 400 to 1,194 tonnes per year. While submissions have drawn attention to new research and pointed to clear areas where IMO could have a role in advancing both understanding and governance, there is little visibility over the strategy, the progress on actions and the oversight of emerging threats, meaning these inputs are effectively lost.

Emerging governance landscape

10 In recent years there has been widespread recognition of the scale and severity of the plastic pollution crisis, culminating in successive United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) resolutions and ultimately UNEA 5/14 which initiated negotiations for a new legally binding instrument to end plastic pollution. The negotiations are set to conclude by the end of 2024. In the current draft of the text (UNEP/PP/INC.4/3) there are multiple areas where potential control measures would require cooperation, coordination and synergy with existing UN agencies operating within their core competencies, therefore it is a critical moment for current and future actions to be clarified.

11 With regard to current progress on the Action Plan, CSC notes that there has been visible progress on certain actions, particularly regarding plastic pellets and fishing gear, whereby PPR is advancing technical elements. However, it is evident that more urgent action will be required to remain committed to achieving the overall vision and accelerating work on additional actions. Additionally, the ultimate strength, binding nature and enforceability of those actions that are progressing will be a litmus test for whether IMO will be effective in meeting the aims of the Action Plan.

12 In addition to the Secretariat keeping the Committee apprised of progress being made at the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee on Plastic Pollution (INC) on a regular basis (MEPC 80/18, paragraph 8.14), a necessary component of future action will be for IMO to engage fully in the negotiations for the new legally binding instrument. This includes by providing a comprehensive review and update on the Action Plan to determine whether it has been effective in reducing marine plastic litter from ships within the desired time frame and where inter-agency cooperation and a new regulatory framework can bolster efforts to achieve that which has not been possible in this space.

Conclusion

13 The urgency of plastic pollution and its impacts throughout its lifecycle require a broader interpretation of both the problem and the actions needed to address it and, specifically, the work IMO is undertaking in the context of the Action Plan must be part of a globally coordinated effort addressing both plastic and microplastic pollution at the source and across all economic sectors. Many of the interventions to address plastic pollution at sea begin on land and the work of IMO cannot happen in isolation, nor stop at port.

Action requested of the Committee

- 14 The Committee is invited to:
- .1 note the information contained above;
 - .2 request the Secretariat to provide an update on progress of items in the Action Plan at MEPC 81;
 - .3 ensure sufficient time for discussion on the next steps at IMO with regard to marine plastic pollution, including substantive discussion on the recommendations in the report from GESAMP WG 43; and
 - .4 request the Secretariat to provide an update in the form of an information document to the fourth and fifth sessions of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee under UNEA 5/14 on the current legal and regulatory framework related to marine plastic pollution under IMO.
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