

## Europe's laggard - Switzerland cannot recycle its way out of its plastic problem

OceanCare press release

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Switzerland has a significant plastic problem. The factual analysis in the OceanCare report "Plastic Matters" reveals sobering weaknesses: Switzerland consumes more plastic per capita than almost any other country in the world. Whether it is packaging waste and other disposable plastic or microplastic, the environmental damage caused by the ever-increasing overconsumption of plastic cannot be made up for with recycling. Self-regulation by the industry functions only inadequately and existing laws are not applied.

The international marine conservation organisation OceanCare is campaigning strongly in its own country to apply laws consistently so that Switzerland can get a grip on its plastic problem.

- 127 kg per year per person: Switzerland has one of the world's highest levels of plastic consumption
- Recycling myth: 85-90% of Swiss plastic waste is incinerated
- Littering costs Switzerland around 200 million CHF a year
- Eyewash: Plastic recycling poses challenges and is not an ideal material for a circular economy.
- Political action required - Consistent implementation of existing laws is needed

***"Switzerland must face its responsibility when it comes to plastic waste; internationally, and at home".***

Fabienne McLellan, Managing Director OceanCare

***"Switzerland is a laggard compared to its EU neighbour countries when it comes to measures against single-use plastics. With the adoption of the Plastic Resolution in March 2022, the United Nations Environment Assembly also called for national action plans to combat plastic pollution. The Swiss population itself also clearly wants interventions, as our recent survey showed. Now it is the Federal Council's turn to systematically solve the plastic problem,"*** so Fabienne McLellan.

### The ocean starts in Switzerland

Every year, around 9 million tonnes of plastic end up in the world's oceans. By now, all oceans are affected by plastic waste, remote beaches as well as the seabed of Antarctica. Every year, around 17,600 tonnes of plastic end up in the Mediterranean Sea alone. Millions of tonnes of plastic waste float in five huge plastic gyres, with the Pacific gyre being almost forty times larger than Switzerland. OceanCare is advocating internationally for a global plastics treaty and the limitation of plastics - along the entire life cycle: from extraction, production, and use, to disposal and reuse of plastic.

**Because rivers are the roots of the oceans - the sea also has its origins in Switzerland.**

### **Tons of microplastics in lakes and soils: an invisible oil spill in Switzerland**

Every year, 14,000 tonnes of macro- and microplastics enter the Swiss environment. Around two thirds of this comes from the abrasion of car tyres (8,900 tonnes). But the second biggest problem is waste: 2,700 tonnes of plastic waste are released into the environment every year. A full 100 tonnes of macroplastics - plastic pieces larger than 0.5 centimetres - end up in Swiss waters and 4,400 tonnes in the soil. Far more invisible are tons of microplastics. A study of Swiss lakes conducted in 2013 showed: almost every sample contained the tiny plastic particles. Lake Geneva alone absorbs about 55 tonnes of plastic every year, most of it as microparticles. By now, an estimated 580 tonnes of plastic are said to have accumulated in the lake. The floodplains of Switzerland's nature reserves are also polluted with an estimated 53 tonnes of microplastic and even in the snow of the Alps and in remote mountain lakes, considerable amounts of microplastic have been found.

### **Almost 100 kilos per person - Switzerland's harmful plastic waste culture**

As a result of the aforementioned 127 kg plastic consumption, every person in Switzerland produces an average of 95 kg of plastic waste per year. Every day around 0.26 kg of plastic waste ends up in the bin - or in nature. Next to packaging, cigarette butts are the most frequently discarded. In March 2021, school classes from Switzerland and Liechtenstein collected almost 1 million cigarette butts in a fortnight - and thus prevented the pollution of 38.3 million litres of water. Microplastics from tyre wear also come into play, as do microfibres from synthetic clothing - about a third of the clothing sold in Europe today is entirely synthetic. In addition, there are microbeads in cosmetics and liquid polymers that are intentionally added to products.

### **Recycling myth - plastic is only limitedly suitable for the circular economy**

85-90% of plastics in Switzerland are incinerated after only a short time of use and are not recycled, let alone reused. This clearly undermines the federal government's official goal of a circular economy and increased recycling. The problem: recycling only works for plastic waste that can be collected as well as actually recyclable. However, most plastic that pollutes the environment comes from abrasion and leakage during the normal use of a product. Most importantly, plastic loses quality (impurities, residues, etc) in every recycling process, and new raw materials must always be added. Even in PET recycling - the best existing process - PET bottles in Europe contain on average only 17% rPET. And: not all plastics are the same: the enormous number of different plastics, additives and countless combinations often make recycling impossible in practice.

***"Unfortunately, recycling is not the hoped-for solution for the environment. In practice, it turned out that plastic in itself is not an ideal material for circular use," so Fabienne McLellan, leader of OceanCare's plastic programme. "Global plastic production is expected to double again in 20 years and almost quadruple by 2050. Given this forecast, it is clear: we cannot recycle our way out of the plastic crisis."***

### **Plastics in food and packaging can make you sick**

Particles of PET, polystyrene or polyethylene have been found in food in Switzerland - e.g. in apples, carrots, salt or in beer. The plastics in question are used in items such as packaging, bottles, pipes and toys. Plastics are made of crude oil and natural gas. Chemicals are added during production, such as hormone-active plasticisers like phthalates or toxic flame retardants made from bromine. Food packaging contains up to 12,000 substances, some of them toxic, and some are transferred from the packaging to the food. When we eat, we consume an invisible cocktail of toxic substances. In certain quantities, they damage the nervous system, upset the metabolism, can lead to obesity and thyroid disorders, as well as trigger diabetes and infertility.



### **Federal Council delays regulation - existing laws are not applied**

No new laws are needed to tackle the plastic waste crisis. Although Swiss legislation says little or nothing specifically about plastic, there are several articles in Swiss legislation that can be applied immediately to reduce the flow of plastics.

***"In over 70 proposals, parliamentarians expressed a clear desire to take steps against plastic litter. Surprisingly, the Federal Council has so far put the brakes on this,"*** says McLellan. OceanCare therefore calls on the Federal Council to consistently exploit existing Swiss laws to regulate plastics and to implement the following measures immediately:

- The Environmental Protection Act, Art. 30a must be consistently applied to ban unnecessary single-use plastic items. This is because disposable packaging for take-away food or plastic bags are often used only once and for a short time.
- Based on the Environmental Protection Act, Art. 26, microbeads must be banned in personal care and cosmetic products.
- The Chemicals Act, the Waste Ordinance and the Ordinance on Beverage Packaging must be consulted to restrict the production, use or disposal of plastics.
- Furthermore, in the longer term, it is necessary to reactivate the once proven comprehensive reuse system, to limit tyre abrasion, microfibres and cigarette butts, and to regulate the use of bioplastics and liquid polymers.

***"Our analysis in the "Plastic Matters" report shows once again how plastic pollutes the Swiss environment and harms our health. Yet Swiss laws could hardly be clearer. As member of the High Ambition Coalition, Switzerland is working at UN level for an ambitious global plastics treaty. It is therefore all the more incomprehensible that the Federal Council is not prepared to face up to its responsibilities at the national level as well,"*** concludes Fabienne McLellan. ***"This issue, which is crucial for the future, must now be taken in hand by politicians. We need binding nationwide measures and ordinances that take a clear stance."***

### **Annexes:**

1. Original report "Plastic Matters" in English incl. source references
2. Executive Summary of report
3. Fact sheet on plastic in Switzerland

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OceanCare is a Swiss non-profit organisation. It was founded in 1989 and has a strong commitment to realistic and cooperative initiatives. The organisation works at national and international level in the areas of marine pollution, environmental changes, fisheries, whaling, sealing, captivity of marine mammals and public education.

OceanCare holds Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (ECOSOC) and is partner of the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM), the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS), and the UNEP/CMS Agreement on the Conservation of Cetaceans in the Black Sea, Mediterranean Sea and Contiguous Atlantic Area (ACCOBAMS), as well as UNEP/MAP. Since 2021, OceanCare is accredited observer to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the International Seabed Authority (ISA). The organisation has been an observer at the IWC since 1992. OceanCare has also been accredited as part of the Major Group 'Science & Technology' to the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA), which is the governing body of UNEP and is a part of the UNEP Global Partnership on Marine Litter. [www.oceancare.org](http://www.oceancare.org)