

Are we heading back towards single-use plastic because of coronavirus?

By [Holly Turner](#) and [Louise Whlborn](#)

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The battle against plastic pollution has rapidly gained momentum in recent years. Our 2018 report - [Plastics phase-out: Exposure through the value chain](#) - analysed the challenges across sectors beyond the use of carrier bags, microbeads and straws. We concluded that the issue was not just a point of public concern but either an opportunity for forward-thinking companies or a threat to business profitability.



Image source: www.pexels.com

The over-riding priorities of the Covid-19 crisis have, at least in the short term, constrained efforts to tackle the challenge, both from a corporate prioritisation and from a hygiene perspective.

But in the long term, a circular economy for plastics is inevitable. This means not simply making, using and disposing of plastic, but removing unnecessary plastic, making innovative products and circulating items back into use.

We have identified 60 new regulations attempting to tackle single-use plastic. We've had discussions with more than 100 companies about their commitments and responses to increasing regulation.

We believe the recent reversal of progress is a blip. As our latest report on progress – [Forging a new future for problematic plastic: Are companies prepared?](#) – shows, businesses need to urgently ramp up disclosure, ambition and action.



How coronavirus has increased demand for “flexible packaging”

Market intelligence firm Wood Mackenzie has predicted a 5% increase in demand for consumer “flexible packaging” in Europe this year. This is despite demand falling to under 1.5% last year, as shown in the graphic below.

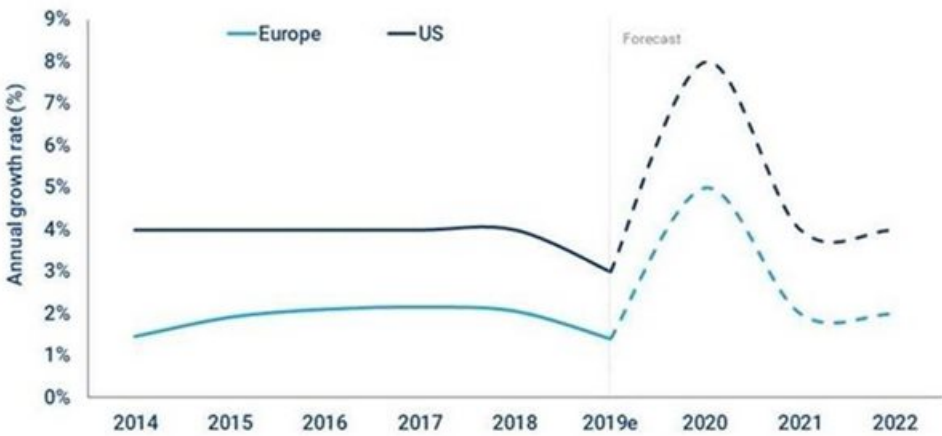
Flexible packaging is mostly single-use plastic such as bags, liners and wraps, although it includes paper, foils and combination materials.

Plastic-free shopping has become harder due to coronavirus lockdowns and retailers have banned re-usable coffee cups over health fears. The price of virgin plastic has also plummeted due to the fall in oil prices, making it more appealing.

With the closure of cafes, fast-food outlets and restaurants, shoppers have been more reliant on supermarkets and other grocers – a sector where 37% of packaging is single-use plastic, according to EY’s *Unwrapping the Packaging Industry* report.

Plastic’s protective and hygienic appeal during the pandemic have boosted consumption in developed markets such as Europe and the US.

Flexible packaging consumption annual growth rates, Europe and the US



Source: Wood Mackenzie Chemicals



Plastic Atlas highlights scale of global plastic pollution crisis

7 Nov 2019



Risks to progress but a complete u-turn on plastic waste commitments is unlikely

Overall, we see responses to the crisis playing out over three themes:

- the elimination of problematic and unnecessary items;
- innovation to ensure plastics we do need are reusable, recyclable or compostable;
- and circulation of the plastics in use within the economy and not the environment.

The scale of plastic pollution, its negative impact on global ecosystems and potential human health risks linked to microplastics are all too important to ignore.

Although some stakeholders are lobbying for governments to lift restrictions on single-use plastic items and some regulation has been delayed, we believe the regulatory pressure will continue.

For example, the European Commission has already confirmed that deadlines for the EU-wide ban on single-use plastic items, set to come into force by 2021, must be respected.

Likewise, the UK government is not budging on the Plastic Packaging Tax, which will apply to plastic packaging that does not contain at least 30% recycled plastic from 2022.



Broll report details plastic usage trends in SA retail industry

2 Aug 2019



How businesses must ramp up disclosure, ambition and action

It is hard to ignore the benefits of plastic within the healthcare industry during the Covid-19 crisis. Almost all PPE (personal protective equipment) is made from plastic, with some items such as aprons and gloves even counted as single-use.

However, as the hospitality sector re-opens for business and regulators review their pre-Covid agenda, it will become clear that – unlike with carbon emissions – ocean plastic pollution has not fallen.

The long-term risks remain. We believe consumer and regulatory pressure to transition to a more circular economy will continue, although it may not necessarily proceed at the desired speed.

Covid-19 should provoke a stronger response, not weaker. The crisis has underscored the need for the business community to focus on long-term solutions, not quick fixes.

Business models and infrastructure can endure and even prosper in times of crisis if they act decisively. It is time for businesses to renew their vows.

Read the full report: [Forging a new future for problematic plastic: Are companies prepared?](#)

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