

Addressing trade-related aspects of marine litter and plastic pollution

Thank you. It is an honour to take part in the 4th Oceans Forum. Whilst much of the world's attention is on the horrific crisis in Ukraine right now, we cannot turn a blind eye to the silent crisis taking place in our oceans every day.

This afternoon's session will address an important question: how can we use - and work with - the multilateral trading system to tackle the unsustainable levels marine litter and plastic pollution?

I will leave it to my expert and distinguished panellists to answer that question in detail, but – if you'll allow me – I will attempt to set the context for the discussion.

The scale of the problem is, quite frankly, overwhelming.

Each and every year, it is estimated that up to 12 million tons of plastic waste leaks into the ocean. I'm sure you've heard that figure before.

But to really put that total weight into perspective, that's equivalent to...

....1.6 million elephants

...55,000 Boeing 747 airplanes

...over 1,000 Eiffel Towers

So that's a lot of plastic pouring into oceans on an annual basis. And, as we know, it doesn't decompose.

Therefore dealing with marine litter and plastic pollution is undoubtedly one of the greatest global environmental challenges of our time.

And it's an issue that really matters to the United Kingdom. I am proud to say that we have been taking action – at a national and international level.

Back in the UK, we are committed to eliminating problematic or unnecessary single-use packaging. The UK Plastics Pact sets us some ambitious goals in this regard. Specifically, by 2025, we are aiming to:

1. Ensure 100% of plastic packaging is reusable, recyclable or compostable
2. Effectively recycle or compost 70% of plastic packaging; *and*
3. Maintain a 30% average of recycled content across all plastic packaging.

We are pleased that equivalent “Pacts” now exist in other countries including the US, South Africa and Chile. We strongly support similar initiatives in other countries.

Internationally, we play an active role in the Global Plastic Action Partnership – one of the key groups trying to turn the tide on plastic pollution. That includes working closely with Kristin from the World Economic Forum – who you will hear from on the panel very shortly – and private sector partners such as Nestlé.

In fact, taking a public-private partnership approach is, in the UK’s view, the key to taking action on plastic pollution and marine litter.

I also wanted to note that the UK, in partnership with Vanuatu, launched the Commonwealth Clean Ocean Alliance in 2018. Since its inception four years ago, 34 Commonwealth member states have united to take action on tackling plastic pollution.

The UK is helping to finance the response to marine litter and plastic pollution. Last year our Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, announced a new £500 million Blue Planet Fund. The Fund aims to protect and enhance the marine environment and reduce poverty, and will include a focus on tackling marine pollution.

Working with UNCTAD, we are also providing up to £5 million to support the Sustainable Manufacturing and Environmental Pollution programme. Work is underway in 10 countries across Africa and Asia to find innovative solutions to prevent manufacturing related plastics pollution from entering the environment. We know that technical assistance and capacity building programmes are crucial.

I've given a few examples of action taken by the UK, alongside our partners. However, we need to do more and we need to do it faster. We need to look at tackling the problem of marine litter and plastic pollution from every possible angle.

That includes the trade angle. The rapid expansion of global trade has undoubtedly contributed toward our collective plastic problem. But trade can also be part of the solution.

Recent research by UNCTAD and the Graduate Institute shows that the volume of plastic trade flows accounts for 5 percent of total trade, with some trade flows – such as plastic packaging – still underestimated.

Encouragingly, there is a growing dialogue on the intersection between trade and marine litter and plastic pollution. Our discussion today is evidence of that. But momentum has also been building at the World Trade Organization.

Last July, the *Informal Dialogue on Plastic Pollution and Environmentally Sustainable Plastics* – also known as the IDP - was launched at the WTO. It has since grown to include 70 Members – half of them developing countries. This was a big achievement.

The IDP aims to improve our understanding of how plastic moves in international trade, whilst encouraging countries to share best practice examples of what they are doing to tackle plastic pollution. The IDP will also look at how promoting trade in goods and services can contribute to more sustainable plastics trade.

The Ministerial Statement that followed identified practical actions that WTO Members can take to support global efforts to reduce plastic pollution.

There has been positive progress at the UN too. At the recent UN Environment Assembly, we saw a breakthrough on negotiations to kickstart a new legally binding treaty on plastic pollution.

While the terms of the treaty are still to be negotiated, it could include measures that promote sustainable production and consumption of plastics, as well as more environmentally sound waste management.

Last month's resolution does not mention trade explicitly. However, it does call for the plastics agreement to develop, implement and update national action plans, which could include trade policy measures.

The WTO Informal Dialogue on Plastic Pollution and Environmentally Sustainable Plastics will be a rich source of information and experience that can contribute to the UN negotiations on the plastics agreement, with concrete, pragmatic input for the to consider. The two conversations should not happen in silos. There should be regular opportunities for updates from the plastics treaty negotiations to the WTO on their progress. As Chair of the WTO Committee on Trade and Environment, I will facilitate this exchange.

Whilst I may have started on a negative note, recent action at the WTO and UN fills me with a sense of optimism.

I am optimistic that the world is finally coming together to reach a global agreement to end the scourge of marine litter and plastic pollution. And I am optimistic that the international trade community is ready to support this process. In fact, I believe that this is the first time that the international trade community has positioned itself so effectively to contribute to the development of an international environmental agreement.

As the UK Ambassador, but also as Chair of the WTO Committee on Trade and Environment, I pledge to do what I can to keep up momentum.

Together, we can restore the health, diversity and beauty of our wondrous oceans.

Thank you.