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Waste

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EU agrees to ban exports of waste plastic to poor countries

Rules, still subject to formal approval, stop exports to non-OECD countries and limit them elsewhere



There are concerns that some plastic waste shipped abroad for recycling ends up in landfills and waterways. Photograph: Fazry Ismail/EPA

The EU has struck a deal to stop ships of waste plastic landing in ports of poor countries.

European lawmakers and member states agreed on Friday to ban exports of plastic rubbish to countries outside the OECD group of mostly rich countries from the middle of 2026. The deal comes as diplomats meet in Nairobi, Kenya, to hammer out a global treaty on plastic pollution.

"The EU will finally assume responsibility for its plastic waste by banning its export to non-OECD countries," said Pernille Weiss, a Danish member of the European parliament with the centre-right EPP group, who was in charge of the proposal. "Once again, we follow our vision that waste is a resource when it is properly managed, but should not in any case be causing harm to the environment or human health."

The rules, which must be formally approved by the European Council and parliament before they come into force, set tighter controls on exports of plastic waste to rich countries and stop exports entirely to non-OECD countries. After five years, countries who then wish to import EU plastic waste can request the commission lift the ban for them if they prove they will treat it well.

Most plastic thrown away in Europe gets burned, and less than a third gets recycled. Campaigners have raised concerns that some plastic waste shipped abroad for recycling ends up in landfills and waterways.

Lauren Weir, a campaigner from the Environmental Investigation Agency, said: "Whilst this is an improvement to current obligations, the evidence of the harms and necessity for a full plastic waste ban are clear. This is a signal that the EU is finally beginning to take responsibility for its role in the global plastic pollution emergency."

The rules mean some forms of non-plastic waste may still be shipped to non-OECD countries if they fulfil certain social and environmental criteria.

The law could also lead to an increase in waste shipped to OECD countries such as Turkey.

Sedat Gündoğdu, a microplastics researcher at Çukurova University in Turkey, said: "The ban of plastic waste exports to non-OECD countries is a significant decision. However, it is disappointing to not see a total export ban on shipments - and not even a ban on hazardous and mixed plastic waste - to Turkey, which is both the largest importer of plastic waste in the EU and an OECD member."

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He added: "We know from past practices that partial bans and ineffective content controls do not prevent the illegal circulation of plastic waste."

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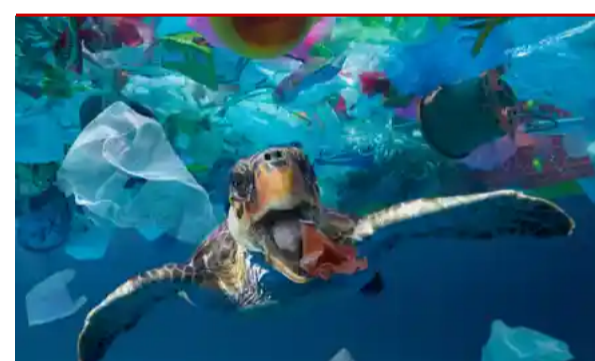
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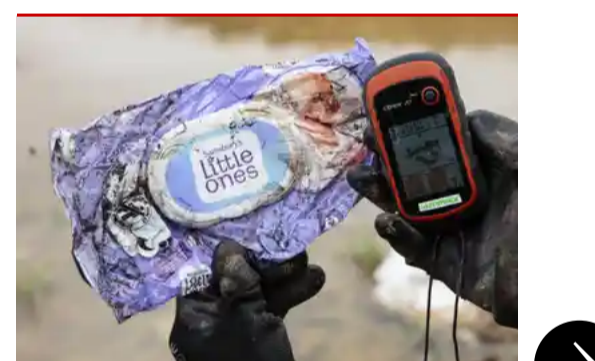
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