THE PROBLEM...

Biodegradable plastics are often seen as improved versions of regular plastics. There is a certain comfort in thinking that our plastic products could disappear completely, as if they had never existed. However, the reality is very different.

To biodegrade, these plastics require specific conditions such as heat, humidity, UV light and a specific amount of time. A wide array of standards exist to specify these conditions in various media such as soil, waste-water treatment plants or industrial composters. However, these standards present considerable shortcomings, which can lead to environmental pollution through the accumulation of non-biodegradable components in the environment.

Biodegradable plastics are not an alternative to regular plastics. It is important to keep in mind that biodegradability is only an end-of-life management option. Prevention of plastic production and use, but also reuse, rank higher in the waste hierarchy and are simply a better choice.

Existing EU policies, such as the Plastics Strategy, agree that biodegradable plastics are not a solution to littering and should only be used in niche applications. Enforcing this approach is, however, proving more difficult than anticipated. The confusion around the properties of biodegradable plastics can lead to unwanted effects. These include producers blindly substituting various products with biodegradable plastic items, or consumers disposing of them improperly, including in nature.

Biodegradable plastic is... plastic!

Most biodegradable plastics are synthesised from fossil resources, exactly as “regular” plastics are. The difference between the two is the expected end-of-life treatment: recycling for traditional plastics and composting or biodegradation in specific conditions for so-called biodegradable plastics. Both types of plastic can contribute to environmental pollution.

IN AN IDEAL WORLD...

Reducing and reusing the plastic we produce would become everyone’s priority.

Producers should not trick people into thinking that a product is “green” or that it helps tackle environmental pollution just because it is biodegradable.

Biodegradable plastics should be used for very niche applications, where prevention and reusable alternatives are not possible (e.g. clips used in horticulture or fruit labels).

Furthermore, standards for biodegradable plastics should include very ambitious requirements to reduce adverse environmental impacts when they are used.

ECOS WORKS TO...

- Make sure policy makers and the wider public take action to reduce overall amounts of plastics and do not seek to substitute them with biodegradable options
- Update and strengthen CEN and ISO standards relating to biodegradation to ensure maximum levels of environmental protection
ECOS is the only environmental organisation worldwide specialised in standardisation.

We are an international network of members sharing a vision of a clean and healthy environment where people live in respect of the planet and its natural resources, preserving them for future generations. ECOS aims to influence the development of ambitious standardisation, legislation and political strategies to promote the transition to a clean and circular economy that respects planetary boundaries.

ECOS promotes and defends environmental interests in the development of standards at European and international level, as well as in the development of technical environmental product policies. Thanks to nearly 20 years of experience and a strong network of members and experts, our role in these processes is highly valued and widely recognised.

ECOS is also a member of the Rethink Plastic alliance, which brings together leading European NGOs, and works with European policy-makers to design and deliver policy solutions for a future that is free from plastic pollution.