Reuse and COVID-19: A multi-stakeholder debate

Justin Boucher
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The virus survives on surfaces

Detected in laboratory setting for up to:
• 72 hours on plastic and stainless steel
• 24 hours on cardboard

Transmission electron micrograph of SARS-CoV-2 virus particles, isolated from a patient.

A novel human coronavirus that is now named severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) (formerly called HCoV-19) emerged in Wuhan, China, in late 2019 and is now causing a pandemic. We analyzed the aerosol and surface stability of SARS-CoV-2 and compared it with...
Governments announce low concern

- “There is currently no evidence of human or animal food or food packaging being associated with transmission of the coronavirus”

- “However, if you wish, you can wipe down product packaging and allow it to air dry, as an extra precaution.”

- “No infection of SARS-CoV-2 through these exposure pathways are known”

- Be sure to “follow general rules for daily hygiene such as regular hand washing”

- May 27 update: “theoretically possible and cannot be ruled out” . . . “based on the relative low stability of coronaviruses in the environment, it is only probable with a short time window after contamination.”
Manufacturers call for prioritizing single-use

• EuPC requested European Commission to delay upcoming single-use plastics directive:

“... the EU Commission DID NOT TAKE into account the hygienic consequences of banning or reducing Single-Use Plastics.”

“Many independent studies repeatedly show that plastics is the material of choice for ensuring hygiene, safety as well as preservation from contamination.”

 Brussels, 8 April 2020

OPEN LETTER

To the kind attention of European Commissioners and their Cabinets:
President, Ms. Ursula von der Leyen
Internal Market Commissioner, Mr. Thierry Breton
Health & Food Safety Commissioner, Ms. Stella Kyriakides
Environment Commissioner, Mr. Virginijus Sinkevičius

Subject: COVID-19 – request for a recast or postponement of the Single-Use Plastics Directive

Dear Ms von der Leyen,
Dear Mr. Breton, Dear Ms. Kyriakides, Dear Mr. Sinkevičius,

We hope this letter finds you and your families & Cabinets well and healthy.

We would like to draw the attention to the benefits of plastic products and in particular single-use applications during the difficult times we are experiencing at this moment in history.

Since the beginning, the Single-Use Plastics Directive 2019/945 has proven to be a difficult piece of legislation to follow and implement both at commercial level and at national level by Member States. Some crucial categories of items have been completely banned or reduced in their availability due to the (alleged) existence of a valid alternative. The Directive also targets the Single Market and the free circulation of packaging and goods among European countries. When drafted and pushed in an extreme short period this “political” piece of legislation the EU Commission DID NOT TAKE into account the hygienic consequences of banning or reducing Single-Use Plastics. If only reflected on littering aspects.

Today and tomorrow we are and will be in a completely different world where hygiene and consumer health will be the number one priority for all of us so it is time to reflect on adjusting strategies for Europe and the world in particular related to the use of plastics.

The term single-use plastics is completely wrong and not justified. To reduce littering an anti-litter regulation will be needed to impact both consumers and for the industry in circularity thinking and keep going in this direction. The banning on plastics followed by many politicians is now backfiring and it is time to work together to rebuild the economy and safeguard consumer health whilst driving the circularity of the plastics industry.

Unfortunately, the Corona Virus (COVID-19) has shown us that not all materials are the same. Single-use plastics are not easily substitutable, in particular in keeping the same hygienic properties to safeguard
Should single-use packaging restrictions be delayed?
Should reuse efforts be paused?
Mixed reactions from governments

- US states pausing, delaying, or cancelling recycling and single-use laws
  - California: plastic bag ban paused
  - Washington: new legislation on recycled content cancelled

- Thailand: planned expansion of single-use plastic bag bans halted
  - >60% increase in plastic waste in April 2020 compared to 2019

- In restaurants “avoid using or sharing items that are reusable . . . Instead, use disposable or digital menus, single serving condiments . . .”

- EU: single-use plastic directive will not be delayed
  - New Farm to Fork Strategy will “support the use of innovative and sustainable packaging solutions using environmentally-friendly, re-usable and recyclable materials”
Strong call for resilience by NGOs

#BreakFreeFromPlastic argues against industry claims:

• “Capitalizing on fears arising from the pandemic, big industry is ruthlessly pushing false health messages to decision makers and to the public.”

• Industry statements about hygiene “scientifically unfounded.”

• The virus can survive on both reusable and single-use packaging

• Instead government should “encourage investment in businesses that are redesigning products and systems, and building a more resilient economy and environment.”
What reuse systems exist?

- Bring Your Own (BYO) Container
- Business Reuse Systems
- Deposit Return Schemes
- Zero Waste Lifestyle
How to ensure safe reuse?

- Use systematic washing and sanitizing following food laws
- Install on-site reuse and cleaning systems controlled by business
- If BYO unavoidable, prevent contact with customer’s containers
Follow FPF’s coronavirus webpage

CORONAVIRUS & PACKAGING

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Food Packaging Forum helps to gather, summarize, and communicate relevant information related to food packaging and human health.

OVERVIEW

The spread of the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) has had impacts across all sectors. As health authorities and scientists around the world work towards identifying solutions to bring the situation under control, the Food Packaging Forum is monitoring the situation closely.

This page serves as a resource providing an overview of relevant scientific studies, government and stakeholder communications, and upcoming events related to SARS-CoV-2 and food packaging. It will be regularly updated as the situation develops.

https://www.foodpackagingforum.org/coronavirus-and-packaging

Transmission electron micrograph of SARS-CoV-2 virus particles, isolated from a patient. Credit: NIAID