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WORKING PAPER

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MEETING DOCUMENT

From:	The Commission
To:	Delegations
Subject:	Informal videoconference of the Ministers of Research on 26 February 2021 AOB item - Latest Scientific Opinion on Biodegradability of Plastics in the Open Environment - Information from the Commission

Delegations will find attached a note from the Commission on "Latest Scientific Opinion on Biodegradability of Plastics in the Open Environment" with a view to the AOB items at the Informal videoconference of the Ministers of Research on 26 February 2021.

AOB – Latest Scientific Opinion on Biodegradability of Plastics in the Open Environment

Information from the Commission

There is a growing global demand for very durable, lightweight and versatile materials, such as plastic. This has led to an increased amount of plastic waste in the open environment, causing harm and pollution in land and marine ecosystems. Biodegradable plastics (BDP) could be part of the solution to this problem, but they also present challenges. Different from normal plastics, biodegradable plastics can be broken down and taken up by microbes without harming the environment. However, biodegradable plastics only biodegrade in specific environments and under certain conditions, often generated in industrial composting facilities.

Upon the request of the former Environment and Research & Innovation Commissioners, the European Commission's Group of Chief Scientific Advisors developed a set of criteria to assess for which products and uses of biodegradable plastics can offer environmental benefits over conventional ones. This Opinion intends to support policy development by the Directorate-General for Environment and to contribute to informing the forthcoming European Commission's policy framework related to bio-based, biodegradable and compostable plastics by helping to define the main challenges and policy actions needed in this area. The Advisors recommendations are:

Recommendation 0: Adopt a definition of biodegradability as a system property which takes into account material properties and specific environmental conditions

Recommendation 1: Limit the use of BDP in the open environment to specific applications for which reduction, reuse, and recycling are not feasible or very difficult in practice.

- Prioritize reduction, reuse and recycling of plastics before considering biodegradation
- Limit use of BDP in the open environment to specific applications where collection from the open environment is not feasible or very difficult in practice.
- Do not consider BDPs as solution for inappropriate waste management or littering.

Recommendation 2: Support the development of coherent testing and certification standards for biodegradation of plastic in the open environment

- Support the development of testing and certification schemes evaluating actual biodegradation of BDP in the context of their application in a specific receiving open environment
- Require testing of biodegradation of BDP applications under laboratory and simulated environmental conditions
- Require assessment of biodegradation and environmental risk of BDP under the conditions of specific open environments. Support the development of a materials catalogue and their relative biodegradation rates in a range of environments

Recommendation 3: Promote the supply of accurate information on the properties, appropriate use and disposal, and limitations of BDPs to relevant user groups

- Initiate and support information campaigns to address current misconceptions and confusion related to bio-based, compostable and biodegradable plastics.
- Support the development of standards for clear, effective European labelling for: a) end-users and consumers to ensure proper use and disposal of BDP applications in the open environment; and b) manufacturers and vendors to ensure accurate information transfer along the value chain.

The Group of Chief Scientific Advisors

The European Commission's Group of Chief Scientific Advisors (GCSA) contribute to the quality of EU legislation through the provision of independent scientific advice to the Commission. The Advisors are seven eminent scientists, appointed in their personal capacities and who advise the Members of the European Commission on issues of public interest. The Advisors work closely with the Scientific Advice for Policy by European Academies (SAPEA) consortium, which gathers interdisciplinary expertise from over 100 academies and societies across Europe.