

# A PLASTIC PLANET

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## From Rubbish to Black Gold Reframing our relationship with WASTE

Our campaign started with a passionate conversation about plastic-free packaging which rapidly sparked another discussion: one that is intimately linked with our supermarket shelves, but surprisingly far from our shopping minds: **waste management and soil fertility.**

The most recent data is sobering: the UK is 30-40 years away from a fundamental eradication of its soil fertility in parts of the country. Soils are so depleted of nutrients that they may only have another 100 harvests left in them.<sup>1,2</sup> At the same time 5-6 million tons of food waste across the UK is not being treated and returned to the soil, but lost to incineration and landfills. The opportunity to change our relationship with waste is blindingly obvious for its environmental benefits, but also carries significant economic weight.

### **From Rubbish to Black Gold: Reframing our relationship with waste**

Compostable packaging does two things. It dramatically cuts the use of unnecessary conventional plastic and increases household food waste capture rates. But it also needs a streamlined waste management system. Which the UK currently does not have. The most frequently cited argument against compostable packaging is that it contaminates the recycling process (compostable and conventional plastics can look the same during the sorting process). But with our recycling targets unmet (only 6% of the plastic thrown away in the EU is recycled<sup>3</sup>), the reverse argument is equally valid: **Plastic packaging contaminates our household food waste-streams which are an invaluable and endless source of compost - fondly nicknamed black gold by gardeners.**

### **What do we need to revolutionise our waste management system?**

The UK already has 50 industrial composting sites that process ~5 million tonnes of green (garden) waste and food waste each year from a total of ~30 million tonnes of household waste created each year. Another 160 Anaerobic Digestion sites also exist which generate energy from food waste, but in the process, they strip off any packaging which heads to landfill. The weakest links in the UK's waste management system are a fragmented collection system across the country, a lack of clear and enforced legislation, and a confused public.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/oct/24/uk-30-40-years-away-eradication-soil-fertility-warns-michael-gove>

<sup>2</sup> University of Sheffield

<sup>3</sup> EU Commission Report

We propose 4 actions to turn the UK's industrial composting infrastructure into a national powerhouse with benefits for farmers, our food chain, the wider economy - and the oceans.

## **1. POLITICAL BACKING & LEGISLATION**

Obligatory household food waste collection across the whole of the UK is the first vital step. Industrial sites produce compost in 60-180 days with food waste and compostable packaging typically ready in 90 days. Evidence from other countries shows that government regulation is a game changer: In just five years, Italy increased their collection of compostable plastics from zero to 100,000 tonnes per year.<sup>4</sup>

Advantages: (a) legislation triggers investment in our waste management infrastructure (b) obligatory collection and composting helps the UK meet its Green House Gas emissions, renewable energy, and EU recycling targets. From 2023 throughout the EU, food waste collections will be obligatory, so let's start now.

## **2. PUBLIC SUPPORT & CLEAR LABELLING**

We need to start a new relationship with our bin bags! Instead of seeing our rubbish as waste – let's see it as a resource. The good news is that 13 million UK households already separate their food waste. That number needs to go up. Simpler waste collections (all food and packaging in one bin) will be critical, as will clear, unambiguous food labeling.

Advantages: We need to do our bit and compostable food packaging and bin liners make it much easier for us to send food waste back to our soils rather than to landfill or incineration.

## **3. BOOSTING UK BUSINESSES & BRINGING SOILS BACK TO LIFE**

Banning plastic packaging will boost the UK's bio-material businesses encouraging them to ramp up their R&D and produce compostable packaging on a commercially viable scale. Investment in a coherent waste management system also creates business and employment opportunities. The UK's agricultural, chemical, manufacturing and farming sectors would all see positive growth.

Advantages: A boost to industries connected to the UK's bio-material sector; a lower use of synthetic fertilisers leading to soil regeneration and more sustainable farming practices with linked employment opportunities.

## **4. LEARNING AFRESH - EDUCATION**

A sea change in how we manage our waste means learning a new way of living. We need re-educating. And when we say 'we', we mean each of us as citizens – and our waste management industry. The result? A greater awareness of where our waste ends up – an eye-opening appreciation of a whole new generation of compostable

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<sup>4</sup> <https://resource.co/article/charting-bioplastics-boom-11509>

plastic-free alternatives - and a conscious reckoning that shifts our views and actions.

“Countries can withstand coups d’état, wars and conflict, even leaving the EU, but no country can withstand the loss of its soil and fertility.”

“If you have heavy machines churning the soil and impacting it, if you drench it in chemicals that improve yields but in the long term undercut the future fertility of that soil, you can increase yields year on year but ultimately you really are cutting the ground away from beneath your own feet. Farmers know that.<sup>5</sup>”

### **USEFUL WEBSITES**

<https://www.compostnetwork.info/policy/biowaste-in-europe/treatment-bio-waste-europe/>  
<https://www.londonbiopackaging.com/about-our-products/faqs-waste-disposal/>  
<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/oct/24/uk-30-40-years-away-eradication-soil-fertility-warns-michael-gove>

### **REFERENCES**

- 1 <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/oct/24/uk-30-40-years-away-eradication-soil-fertility-warns-michael-gove>
- 2 University of Sheffield
- 3 EU Commission Report
- 4 <https://resource.co/article/charting-bioplastics-boom-11509>
- 5 <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/oct/24/uk-30-40-years-away-eradication-soil-fertility-warns-michael-gove>

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