

Objective 6: Reduce Tobacco Product Waste

Cigarette butts have been the most commonly collected trash item on beach cleanups globally for more than three decades.²⁹ Cigarette butts contain a filter, which is made out of a type of plastic called cellulose acetate that break down into harmful microplastics.³⁰ These cigarette butts also spark wildfires, create environmental health hazards, are harmful to aquatic life, animals, and humans, and cost millions of dollars to clean up.³¹ In addition to cigarette butts, other types of tobacco products like e-cigarettes, heated tobacco products, cigar tips and packaging also contribute to tobacco product waste (TPW). E-cigarette waste leaches toxic chemicals and heavy metals from batteries into the environment.³²

Key Concepts:

Tobacco Product Waste (TPW) includes all tobacco product materials discarded as waste, including cigarette butts and packaging, plastics and metals from vaping devices, e-cigarettes pods that contain vaping liquids, cigar tips, and other byproducts of tobacco use that have been littered or released into the environment. Many forms of TPW are non-biodegradable and contain toxic substances.³²

Upstream Solutions are policies that reduce TPW at the source, such as sales restrictions, comprehensive smoking restrictions, and educational campaigns. These policies are more likely to be effective than policies aimed at mitigating or managing litter once it has already been discarded.

Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR), also known as Product Stewardship, is a strategy to place a shared responsibility for end-of-life product management on producers and other entities involved in the product chain, instead of the public. This strategy relies on extensive industry involvement so, despite being a viable strategy to reduce waste from some used products such as mattresses, paint, and pharmaceuticals/sharps, this is not a recommended strategy for TPW given the tobacco industry's history of denial of the health consequences of product use as well as its manipulation of policies and public opinion.³³

Key Themes

- Prohibit the sale of products that contribute to TPW.
- Improve education around the dangers of TPW.
- Hold the tobacco industry accountable for the environmental damage caused by TPW.



Strategies

Policy

- Prohibit sales of all or some tobacco products, like filtered cigarettes, plastic-tips for cigarillos, pods used in vaping, and other tobacco products that are most often littered.
- Regulate tobacco products as hazardous waste, including requiring hazardous waste signage at the point-of-sale and specific handling instructions.
- Reduce the density of retailers by restricting the issuance of tobacco retail licenses to decrease the sale and consumption of tobacco products and accumulation of tobacco waste in all communities.
- Hold the tobacco industry or manufacturers responsible for removing TPW from the environment through product take-back programs and deposit and return schemes that do not involve tobacco industry planning or implementation.
- Develop guidelines for schools and universities to safely collect and dispose of hazardous tobacco product waste discarded on campus.

Education

- Reduce TPW through education and social norm change campaigns to increase awareness of the impacts of tobacco product waste and proper disposal practices.
- Educate individuals who violate anti-littering laws about how TPW affects the environment as an alternative to punishment in order to create awareness and change behavior.
- Educate tobacco users about how microplastics from discarded cigarette butts and e-cigarette parts harm ecosystems, plants, animals, and humans after ending up in our water supply.

Research

- Support and publicize research on environmental, health, and economic impacts of TPW.
- Conduct research on alternative solutions to reducing TPW, including whether ashcans increase proper disposal of cigarette butts or how social norm change strategies can be used to achieve compliance with anti-littering laws.
- Research the economic costs associated with TPW, including the costs of cleanups, volunteer-supported litter disposal efforts, and the potential damage to ecosystems associated with the entire life cycle of tobacco product cultivation, production, and use.

Partnerships

- Continue to collaborate with local governments and environmental groups to support upstream solutions and prevent tobacco product littering.
- Do not collaborate with groups who work with the tobacco industry on EPR strategies and educate partners on why EPR is not a viable strategy.

Funding

- Increase tobacco retailer licensing fees and allocate a portion of the fee to clean up costs associated with TPW, especially in communities most impacted by tobacco use and TPW.

