

# EXPLAINED

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Pollution - Air, Water, Soil & E-waste

**Complete overhaul:** The government has banned the manufacture, import, stocking, distribution, sale, and use of all identified single-use plastic items with effect from July 1. | Photo Credit: PTI

**The story so far:** A ban on the use of single-use plastics that was notified by the Union Environment Ministry on August 2021 came into effect on July 1 this year. The notification said national and State-level control rooms would be set up to check illegal manufacture, import, stocking, distribution, sale and use of banned single use plastic items. The Plastic Waste Management Amendment Rules, 2021, will also prohibit manufacture, import, stocking, distribution, sale and use of plastic carry bags having thickness less than 120 microns with effect from December 31, 2022.

The Centre defines it as an object made of plastic that is intended to be used “only once” before being disposed off or recycled. For the purposes of the ban, there is a list of 21 items that come under the definition of single-use plastic including ear buds with plastic sticks, plastic sticks for balloons, plastic flags, candy sticks, ice-cream sticks, thermocol for decoration, plates, cups, glasses, cutlery such as forks, spoons, knives, straw, trays, wrapping or packing films around sweet boxes, invitation cards, and cigarette packets, plastic or PVC banners less than 100 microns, stirrers.

These objects were listed by the Environment Ministry in August when it notified the Plastic Waste Management Amendment Rules, 2021. Single-use plastic items such as these had “low utility and high littering potential,” it noted. Plastic packaging waste, a major contributor to the much larger problem of plastic waste pollution, isn't yet covered under the phase-out of single-use plastic items. Mineral water bottles or plastic bottles of aerated drinks are unaffected by the ban, though, in popular imagination, they are representative of ‘plastic pollution.’

So far 32 States/UTs have reportedly constituted a dedicated Task Force to eliminate the use of single-use plastics. Of these 14 states/UTs and 12 Central Ministries, as of March, had developed action plans describing how they would be enforcing this.

A few States, for example Maharashtra, already have legislation banning the manufacture and storage of such plastic. But implementing it wasn't always successful as there was regular supply from States where such bans were not in force. An all-India ban, it's hoped, would make enforcement more effective.

According to the Environment Protection (EP) Act, violating the ban could invite “punitive action”. Manufacturers and distributors of single-use plastic goods were directed to have zero inventory by June 30, according to officials in the Union Environment Ministry. The EP Act says that violating the ban could invite a five-year imprisonment and a fine of upto 1 lakh, or both. If the violations are repeated, it could mean additional fines up to 5000 for each day. There are different penalties for companies, organisations, and government departments under the EP Act.

The Environment Ministry told the Rajya Sabha last July of its plan to phase out some categories of single use plastic by 2022. A draft outlining the manner in which the ban was to be implemented was issued in March and involved amending the Plastic Waste Management Rules, 2016. Before the amendments came into force, the Plastic Waste Management Rules only prohibited the manufacture, import, stocking, distribution, sale and use of carry bags and plastic sheets less than 50 microns in thickness in the country. There is a ban on sachets using

plastic material used for storing, packing or selling gutkha, tobacco and pan masala. Since October 2021, there is a ban on the manufacture, import, stocking, distribution, sale and use of carry bags made of virgin or recycled plastic less than 75 microns as opposed to 50 microns under the earlier version of the rules. At the 4th United Nations Environment Assembly in 2019, India piloted a resolution on addressing single-use plastic products pollution.

The All India Plastic Manufacturers Association has said that the ban would shutter 88,000 units in the plastic manufacturing business. These employ close to a million people and contribute to exports worth 25,000 crore. Fast Moving Consumer Goods companies (FMCG) would be severely affected by the the ban due to their dependence on plastic straws, plates. Their replacements, industry representatives say, are available but cost much more than their plastic alternatives. There is also limited capacity in India to provide biodegradable replacements. Average and prominent consumer goods companies have written to the government requesting a six-month extension before the ban takes effect and that companies that are likely to go out of business be compensated. The government has, however, signalled its firm commitment to the ban. Environment Minister Bhupender Yadav said the government had multiple consultations with the industry since 2018. Stakeholders had nearly a year to find alternatives to the use of such plastic and that industries should work to introduce new technologies and alternatives to preserve livelihoods of those who worked in plastic manufacturing industries, he added.

Unlike thicker and denser plastic material, single-use plastic objects being light and flexible are less amenable to being recycled. While 99% of plastic is recycled, they constitute heavier plastics that are likely to be collected by ragpickers and plastic waste recyclers. Single use plastics do not provide an incentive enough for the effort needed to collect them and hence they lie around, leach their toxins into the soil and cause environmental damage in both land and sea.

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