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Toxic chemicals in non-plastic disposable tableware, consumer test reveals

A [new test](#) by consumer organisations in four countries¹ found chemicals of concern in single-use tableware made of popular non-plastic alternatives, such as disposable plant fibre bowls, paper straws, or palm leaf plates. Several products were also found to mislead consumers with unsubstantiated green claims. BEUC and its member organisations urge the EU to ensure that single-use plastic alternatives are safe and do not mislead consumers.

In total, over half of sampled products contained one or more unwanted chemicals above recommended levels (53%), including some that are suspected to cause cancer. Additional 21% contained these chemicals close to the limits. With many single-use plastic items about to be banned in the EU (as of 3 July 2021),² manufacturers and consumers are increasingly turning to alternatives made of bamboo, paper, or palm leaves. Unlike plastics, the safety of these materials is unregulated in the EU as no specific rules exist.

The findings also indicate that the alleged green credentials of popular plastic alternatives may mislead consumers: several sampled products claim to be compostable or biodegradable. Yet, the test found that many contain 'forever' chemicals that may not fully degrade in nature for hundreds of years, migrating into the environment and accumulating in soil, water and living organisms.

Monique Goyens, Director General of BEUC, commented:

"With single-use plastic plates and cups soon to be a thing of the past, plant-based and paper alternatives are naturally gaining popularity among consumers. It is wonderful that the EU is finally weeding out throwaway plastic, but it must equally weed out toxic chemicals in the alternatives.

"The fact that many plastic alternatives are loaded with 'forever' chemicals sadly shows that one persistent pollutant is being replaced with another. The results we publish today prove that current EU food packaging rules fail consumers. It is high time the EU get its act together and comes up with strict food packaging rules that both protect consumers and the environment.

"Green labels such as 'natural', 'biodegradable', or 'compostable' have no place on single-use dinnerware that contain persistent chemicals. Such bogus claims create confusion among consumers and make it difficult for them to identify the plates, straws or bowls that are more environmentally friendly than others. The EU needs to clean up the food packaging market from all misleading green claims."

Test details:

The survey sampled:

- **57 items**, such as disposable bowls made from straw or bagasse (i.e., fibres from sugarcane stalks), paper straws, and palm leaf tableware.
- **Three categories of items**: 23 bowls and plates made from moulded natural fibres, mainly bagasse; 18 paper straws; and 16 palm leaf bowls and plates.
- **Certain groups of chemicals and pesticides**:
 - **Fluorinated compounds (PFAS)**, also called 'forever' chemicals because they persist in nature. PFAS are widely used to make food packaging and other consumer products water-, grease- and/or stain-resistant. PFAS are linked to cancers, IQ loss, and other severe health effects.
 - **Chloropropanols** may emerge during the manufacture of paper packaging; they have cancer-causing properties.
 - **Pesticides** may be present in plant-based food contact items either as residues of the pesticides used to grow sugarcane, palm trees and other natural materials or from processing the raw material. Exposure to certain pesticides is linked to cancers, birth defects, and endocrine disruption, among others.

Access the complete test results [here](#).

Context:

Single-use straws, cutlery, and plates made of plastics will soon be banned in the EU, to avert the ever-growing spread of plastics in our environment. Food businesses are responding to consumer concerns about the environmental impact of plastic by increasingly switching to alternatives, made either of paper and board or 'natural' packaging materials, such as bamboo, straw, or palm leaves. While these plant-based food packaging materials and items help reduce our reliance on single-use plastics, they may however also expose consumers – and the environment – to chemicals of concern.

Products and packaging in contact with food – whether made from plastics, paper, or other materials – are known to release chemicals into foodstuff, potentially putting consumer health at risk. Existing EU legislation³ is meant to safeguard consumers against such risks; however, the legal framework provides [insufficient protection of consumers](#) because specific rules do not exist for most food packaging materials as previously highlighted by the European Parliament.⁴

Previous tests by European consumer groups have already shown that [paper straws and coffee cups can contain suspected cancer-causing chemicals](#), as well as substances that have not been risk assessed by the European Food Safety Authority.

ENDS

¹ Altroconsumo (Italy), Forbrugerrådet TÆNK (Denmark), OCU (Spain), and UFC-Que Choisir (France)

² In 2018, the European Commission launched an ambitious plan to prevent and reduce plastic waste in Europe. This plan includes targeted measures, such as bans, against the 10 most found single-use plastic items on European beaches; including several items used in contact with food, such as plastic cutlery, plates, and straws.

³ Regulation (EC) No 1935/2004 on materials and articles intended to come into contact with food.

⁴ European Parliament. [Report on the implementation of the Food Contact Materials Regulation \(\(EC\) No 1935/2004\)](#). 2015/2259(INI). July 2016.

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