

28th Session of the Committee on Agriculture

Item 3.4: Guidance on use of agricultural plastics

Over the last 70 years, the use of plastics in agrifood systems and food value chains has become pervasive. Low-cost and adaptable plastic products have crept into every part of our food systems – from mulching films, tree guards to greenhouses in production; and crates and packaging in processing and marketing. The Organization’s report *Assessment of agricultural plastics and their sustainability: A call for action (2021)* estimated that every year 12.5 million tonnes of plastic products are used in plant and animal production, and the additional 37.3 million tonnes in food packaging. The crop production and livestock sectors are the largest users, accounting for 10 million tonnes per year. The Report highlighted that the widespread and long-term use of plastic products in agriculture, coupled with lack of systematic collection and sustainable management, leads to their accumulation in soils and aquatic environments, with potential for harm to ecosystems and human health.

There are currently no overarching international policy or legislative instruments that cover all aspects of the use of plastics in agrifood value chains and throughout their lifecycle. Similarly, at national level, only a few countries have governance measures that address some limited aspects of agricultural plastics. Existing FAO guidance largely focuses on the benefits of agricultural plastics.

The United Nations Environment Assembly, in its Resolution 5/14, agreed to complete negotiations for a new global agreement to end plastic pollution at the end of 2024, with adoption in early 2025. Assuming a similar timeframe to come into force as for the Minamata Convention on Mercury, the expected date of entry into effect for the new agreement could be around 2028/2029. The Resolution also recognized the need for voluntary instruments.

A new Code of Conduct for the sustainable management of agricultural plastics is proposed to be developed in parallel with negotiations of the new global agreement on plastics. It could be adopted well in advance of the new plastics agreement coming into force, and provide sector specific guidance to tackle plastics in the agriculture sector. Specifically, the Code could cover the full life cycle of plastic use throughout agrifood value chains from its design, regulatory approval, manufacture, distribution, sale, use, and management at end-of-life. It could offer solutions to prevent plastic pollution in agriculture and its related risks to human health and adverse effects on human well-being and the environment. The Code could help to balance the benefits and trade-offs of agricultural plastic use while safeguarding food security, food safety and all three dimensions of sustainability.

The Committee is invited to:

- *recognize* the need for improved intersectoral collaboration and governance to address issues relevant to agricultural plastic use;
- *take note* of the recommendations of the *Assessment of agricultural plastics and their sustainability: a call for action*, and *invite* FAO, subject to availability of resources, in collaboration with other relevant United Nations agencies, academia, non-governmental organizations, and the private sector, to undertake further assessments to fill the global and regional knowledge gaps related to distribution, benefits, trade-offs, and risks in agricultural plastics and their alternatives, and provide regular updates to COAG; and
- *encourage* FAO, subject to the resource availability, through inclusive consultations with Members, regional bodies, other international organizations, the private sector, civil society, and agricultural communities, to develop a comprehensive Voluntary Code of Conduct on agricultural plastics use and sustainability to be presented for consideration at the 29th Session of COAG.

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