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Tobacco is harmful to both humans and the environment

By Judith Mackay

This year, the World Health Organization's annual World No Tobacco Day celebrated on May 31 focuses on the harm tobacco causes to the environment, and why this gives smokers yet one more reason to quit. Each year events take place in many places, including the Chinese mainland, Hong Kong and Macao, to draw attention to what needs to be done to reduce tobacco use.

Environmental damage: Most people know that tobacco is harmful to humans but are less familiar with the countless ways that tobacco harms the environment, from cultivation production and distribution to waste. Globally, some 32 million tons of tobacco leaf are used to make six trillion cigarettes a year, causing mass deforestation, water shortages, and littering. Some of the toxic elements of fertilizers and pesticides seep into water supplies, but the damage doesn't stop there. For example, tobacco smoke pollutes the air; careless smoking causes fires; the transport of tobacco products leads to greenhouse gases.

Greenhouse emissions: With an annual greenhouse gas contribution of 84 megatons of carbon dioxide equivalent, the tobacco industry contributes to climate change and raising global temperatures, reducing climate resilience, wasting resources and damaging ecosystems.

Deforestation: Tobacco production, including cultivation and curing, accounts for 5 percent of global deforestation. Annually 600 million trees are chopped down to make cigarettes, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. Nearly 1.5 billion acres of global forest have been lost to tobacco farming since the 1970s, undermining tree-planting projects.

The solution comes down to reducing tobacco use — discouraging youth uptake and encouraging smokers to quit. Governments must put in place smoke-free environments, advertising and sponsorship bans, cessation support, tax and price measures, and other interventions such as viable alternatives to tobacco farming

Water use: It takes about 22 billion tons of water a year to grow the global tobacco crop, or the equivalent of 8.8 million Olympic-sized swimming pools, often in places where water is limited.

Litter: Cigarette butts are the most littered item on the planet. The manufacturing process creates more than two million tons of waste annually. Over one-third of cigarette butt litter winds up in the oceans, and from 19 to 38 percent of total debris in ocean cleanups are cigarette butts.

Cigarette butts are a form of non-biodegradable plastic waste that carry tobacco residue, toxic chemicals and heavy metals, that have been shown to harm aquatic and plant life. Plastics in packaging and cigarette butts degrade into microplastics that may be ingested by marine organisms and animals. Seventy percent of sea birds and 30 percent of sea turtles sampled have been found to have partially digested cigarette butts.

New tobacco products are not environmentally friendly. According to WHO, “e-cigarette waste is potentially a more serious environmental threat than cigarette butts since e-cigarettes introduce plastic, nicotine salts, heavy metals, lead, mercury and flammable lithium-ion batteries into waterways, soils and to wildlife”.

The environmental effects of tobacco come at a huge economic cost. The Global Center for Good Governance in Tobacco Control estimates that in China alone the total annual economic losses caused by consuming two trillion sticks of cigarettes are 392 billion yuan (\$58.8 billion). The cost of butt litter to marine pollution is 25 billion yuan, in addition to the bill of 236 million yuan in waste management.

Greenwashing is “disinformation disseminated by an organization to present an environmentally responsible image”. WHO and STOP (a global tobacco industry watchdog) have produced a joint report:

“Talking Trash: Behind the Tobacco Industry’s ‘Green’ Public Relations”. The report outlines how the tobacco industry has been working to rehabilitate its image by showcasing sustainability efforts that critics claim is a form of “greenwashing”.

Big tobacco has even secured a list of environmental awards which suggest the industry is a beacon of sustainability. The website of British American Tobacco (BAT), for example, promotes news releases with headlines such as, “BAT in Dow Jones Sustainability Indices for 20th Consecutive Year” and “BAT recognized as Climate Leader by the Financial Times”.

Cigarette producers are funding some “green” activities such as beach cleanup efforts. Tobacco firms have worked with Brazil’s Ministry of the Environment on a program to preserve the country’s forests; funded education, sanitation, and health through a partnership with a local district in India; and created a project to facilitate water access in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Senegal.

This kind of activity gives the impression that the tobacco industry is socially and environmentally responsible, obscuring the incalculable health and economic toll to smokers, nonsmokers, farmers, governments and the environment.

So far, the tobacco industry has not taken responsibility for the diseases and deaths its products cause or for the damage its business does to the environment.

Action: The 2022 World No Tobacco Day campaign is exposing the tobacco industry’s efforts to “greenwash” its reputation. It calls on governments to ban this greenwashing and to avoid partnerships with cigarette companies engaged in environmental activities that could promote the industry as an environmental partner. It also calls on environmental and sustainability accreditation organizations not to endorse industry greenwashing or provide awards to the tobacco industry.

Cigarette butts are “single use plastics” that must be an integral part of government efforts addressing environmental toxins and be subject to regulatory restrictions or bans. Yet while over 100 countries have focused regulations and bans on shopping bags and food packaging,

few have embraced the extended producer responsibility approach for tobacco product waste, which would make the tobacco industry pay a fee for the waste management.

Tobacco products provide no benefit to humanity or the economy, so the tobacco industry should not be treated like any other industry. Designating “social responsibility” to a tobacco producer could undermine tobacco control policies, especially when it portrays the tobacco industry positively or allows some form of promotion and sponsorship. Even efforts by the tobacco industry to change to eco-friendly filters could become part of a marketing scheme that could undermine advertising bans or regulations.

The solution comes down to reducing tobacco use — discouraging youth uptake and encouraging smokers to quit. Governments must put in place smoke-free environments, advertising and sponsorship bans, cessation support, tax and price measures, and other interventions such as viable alternatives to tobacco farming.

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Data on footprint from Zaffeiridou et al. <https://pubs.acs.org/doi/10.1021/acs.est.8b01533>

Of 84 megatons of carbon dioxide equivalents 53% are from drying and 25% from farming tobacco, 19% from cigarette production and the rest from shipping, waste, etc.

New products are not included yet, but batteries and electronics add to the toxicity for the planet.