

Jamaica Gleaner Online

Plastic garbage posing solid waste crisis

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THE EDITOR, Sir:

WE NOTE with interest the front page news on Thursday, June 24 concerning the Government's misguided attempt to impose an environment tax on 'PET' plastic, the material used to make most beverage bottles in Jamaica. The article gave the impression that the bottles themselves were to be taxed, but as we understand it, the proposed cess was to be imposed on imports of the raw material, not the bottles.

As executive director of Northern Jamaica Conservation Association (NJCA), I would like to express our organisation's grave concerns about the crisis of solid waste management in Jamaica, and particularly the enormous problem of plastic garbage. A major contributing factor to this problem, which costs the Government and taxpayers millions of dollars in solid waste management services and incalculable environmental damage, is the importation and manufacture of all kinds of non-biodegradable containers and packages, without any provision for their recovery, recycling or safe disposal.

These materials end up as litter on our roads and beaches, debris choking our gullies, rivers and in-shore waters, toxic air pollution when they are burnt, and unsightly healthy hazards as they pile up in illegal garbage dumps throughout the length and breadth of this beautiful country of ours.

As part of NJCA's environmental education programme we urge citizens to reduce the volume of their solid waste by up to 60 per cent by separating their garbage into biodegradable waste, which they can turn into compost, and non-biodegradable waste. However, the problem of how to dispose of plastic garbage is one of the most pressing issues of concern for rural communities in northern Jamaica, especially those without garbage collection service. Plastic 'PET 1' drink bottles are by far the most numerous and visible items of plastic waste in our country.

Plastic garbage is also a matter of great concern to the St. Ann Parish Development Committee (PDC), which recently passed a resolution moved by the NJCA representative calling for the Ministry of Land and Environment and the National Environment and Planning Agency (NEPA) to impose a mandatory deposit/refund system for recyclable plastic beverage bottles and put in place other financial incentives to encourage the reduction and proper disposal of solid waste.

We strongly believe that the only effective way to deal with the problem of these ubiquitous plastic bottles is to give them a dollar value which can be redeemed at their source: the beverage manufacturers, importers and distributors. Our convictions are supported by a recent feasibility study on solid waste management options for Jamaica done by the Sustainable Economic Development Unit of UWI, which concluded that economic instruments such as deposit/refund systems are economically viable and effective in improving solid waste management when used in concert with a proper regulatory framework.

We know that the drink companies may oppose this suggestion on the grounds that there are many other types of plastic garbage, but we have to start somewhere to clean up the mess we are in! NJCA invites the people of Jamaica to make their views known to Dean Peart, Minister of Land and Environment, about the suggestion for a deposit/refund system for plastic beverage bottles to encourage their recovery and removal from the solid waste stream in Jamaica. We need a practical solution to this problem NOW!

I am, etc.,

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