

Ban cigarette filters to save the environment, suggest researchers

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Ban cigarette filters. Start a deposit-return scheme for used butts. Hold manufacturers responsible for clean-ups. Place warnings on packets about the impact of simply flicking one's used cigarettes away. These are among the policy measures that Thomas Novotny of the San Diego State University in the US and Elli Slaughter advocate to curb the environmental harm done through the large-scale littering of cigarette butts, packaging and matches. The suggestions are part of a review article in Springer's journal *Current Environmental Health Reports*.

Cigarette butts and other tobacco product waste are the items that are most commonly picked up during urban and beach clean-ups worldwide. An estimated 4.5 trillion of the annual 6 trillion [cigarettes](#) sold worldwide do not end up in a dustbin or ashtray, but are simply flicked away along a roadside or on a pavement. The ban on indoor smoking may have exacerbated this.

Tobacco waste products contain the same toxins, nicotine, pesticides and carcinogens found in cigarettes and cigars, and can contaminate the environment and water sources. Studies show that the chemicals within cigarettes, such as arsenic, nicotine, lead and ethyl phenol, could leach into salt and fresh water and be acutely toxic to aquatic micro-organisms and fish.

It is not only the cigarette ingredients that harm the environment, but also the materials they are made of. Plastic cigarette filters are practically non-biodegradable and can leach chemicals for up to ten

years. In the US alone an estimated 49.8 million kilograms of filters are discarded annually. This excludes the weight of remnant butt tobacco, discarded packages, lighters and matches, and other tobacco products such as cigars and smokeless tobacco.

The researchers call filtered cigarettes a "farce" in terms of consumer safety, with a recent National Cancer Institute review showing that these are not healthier or safer than non-filtered ones. Novotny and Slaughter therefore propose a ban on filtered cigarettes. Jonathan Samet from the University of Southern California and the editor of the article recently advised the California State Legislature that "...it is evident that filtered cigarettes have had little impact on the risks of smoking over the last half century."

Because existing anti-littering laws have not changed smokers' littering habits, Novotny and Slaughter ask for new environmental interventions and partnerships between tobacco control and environmental groups. They propose litigation to hold the tobacco industry legally responsible for clean-up and nuisance costs associated with their products, advocating the use of labels on cigarette packages about the toxicity of discarded butts, and a deposit-return scheme similar to that used for glass and metal beverage containers. Other options include requesting the industry to pay an advanced recycling fee or to take back all discarded tobacco waste products.

"Tobacco waste products are ubiquitous, environmentally hazardous and a significant community nuisance," says Novotny. "With two-thirds of all smoked cigarettes, numbering in the trillions globally, being discarded into the environment each year, it is critical to consider the potential toxicity and remediation of these waste products."

More information: Novotny, T.E. & Slaughter, E. (2014). Tobacco Product Waste: An Environmental Approach To Reduce Tobacco

Consumption. *Current Environmental Health Reports*. DOI: [10.1007/s40572-014-0016-x](https://doi.org/10.1007/s40572-014-0016-x)

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