

Big tobacco's environmental impact is 'devastating': WHO

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The WHO accused the tobacco industry of various means of environmental damage, from widespread deforestation to spewing out plastic and chemical waste.

The tobacco industry is a far greater threat than many realise as it is one

of the world's biggest polluters, from leaving mountains of waste to driving global warming, the WHO said Tuesday.

The World Health Organization accused the industry of causing widespread deforestation, diverting badly needed land and water in poor countries away from food production, spewing out plastic and chemical waste as well as emitting millions of tonnes of carbon dioxide.

In its report released on World No Tobacco Day, the UN agency called for the tobacco industry to be held to account and foot the bill for the cleanup.

The report, "Tobacco: poisoning our planet", looks at the impacts of the whole cycle, from the growth of plants to the manufacturing of tobacco products, to consumption and waste.

While tobacco's health impacts have been well documented for decades—with smoking still causing more than eight million deaths worldwide every year—the report focuses on its broader environmental consequences.

The findings are "quite devastating," Ruediger Krech, WHO director of health promotion, told AFP, charging that the industry is "one of the biggest polluters that we know of."

Poison

He slammed tobacco companies' frequent efforts to rehabilitate their image through beach cleanups and funding environmental and disaster relief organisations as "greenwashing".

"The tobacco industry dumps toxic waste into communities and depletes natural resources," he told a press conference.

"Tobacco is not only poisoning people, it's poisoning our planet."

The industry is responsible for the loss of some 600 million trees each year—or five percent of global deforestation—while tobacco growing and production uses 200,000 hectares of land and 22 billion tonnes of water annually, the report found.

It also emits around 84 million tonnes of carbon dioxide, it said.

In addition, "tobacco products are the most littered item on the planet, containing over 7,000 toxic chemicals, which leech into our environment when discarded," Krech said.

4.5 trillion cigarette butts

He pointed out that each one of the estimated 4.5 trillion cigarette butts that end up in the oceans, rivers, sidewalks and beaches every year can pollute 100 litres of water.

And up to a quarter of all tobacco farmers contract so-called green tobacco sickness, or poisoning from the nicotine they absorb through the skin.

Farmers who handle tobacco leaves all day consume the equivalent of 50 cigarettes worth of nicotine a day, Krech said.

This is especially worrying for the many children involved in tobacco farming.

"Just imagine a 12-year-old being exposed to 50 cigarettes a day," he said.

Most tobacco is grown in poorer countries, where water and farmland

are often in short supply, and where such crops are often grown at the expense of vital food production, the report said.

UN agencies have launched a project to try to help farmers transition to other crops.

Plastic pollution

At the same time the processing and transportation of tobacco account for a significant share of global greenhouse gas emissions—with the equivalent of one-fifth of the global airline industry's carbon footprint.

In addition, products like cigarettes, smokeless tobacco and e-cigarettes also contribute significantly to the global build-up of plastic pollution, WHO warned.

Cigarette filters contain microplastics—the tiny fragments that have been detected in every ocean and even at the bottom of the world's deepest trench—and make up the second-highest form of plastic pollution worldwide, the report said.

Stressing that there is no evidence filters provide any proven health benefits over smoking non-filtered cigarettes, the UN agency urged policy makers worldwide to consider banning them.

The WHO also called for governments to immediately halt the some \$500 billion in subsidies the tobacco industry receives each year, and also urged them to stop allowing taxpayers to foot the bill for cleaning up the industry's mess.

Each year, China for instance dishes out around \$2.6 billion and India around \$766 million, while Brazil and Germany pay some \$200 million each to clean up littered tobacco products, the report found.

It is important, Krech said, that "the industry pay actually for the mess that they are creating."

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