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Organization

A conceptual illustration of a forest where the trees are made of cigarette packs and the branches are lit cigarettes. The ground is covered in a thick layer of discarded cigarette butts and ash. The background is a hazy, greyish-white, suggesting a polluted atmosphere. The overall image is a powerful metaphor for the environmental impact of tobacco consumption.

Tobacco and its environmental impact: an overview



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Foreword

by Dr Oleg Chestnov, WHO Assistant Director-General



The fact that today most people are aware of the health impacts of using tobacco is a victory for global health and well-being. It moves us one step closer to a world where a billion people are less likely to die from the consequences of chewing, smoking or ingesting tobacco.

But successful advocacy to reduce the health impacts of tobacco have not been matched by successes in challenging other impacts from tobacco – including on education, equality, economic growth, and on the environment – all of which can affect a country's development.

This overview opens the lid on a Pandora's Box containing the quieter but shockingly widespread impacts of tobacco from an environmental perspective. The tobacco industry damages the

environment in ways that go far beyond the effects of the smoke that cigarettes put into the air. Tobacco growing, the manufacture of tobacco products and their delivery to retailers all have severe environmental consequences, including deforestation, the use of fossil fuels and the dumping or leaking of waste products into the natural environment. Cigarettes pollute our air, as air quality testing has shown in major cities such as London and Los Angeles. Long after a cigarette has been extinguished it continues to cause environmental damage in the form of non-biodegradable butts – millions of kilograms of which are discarded every year. From start to finish, the tobacco life cycle is an overwhelmingly polluting and damaging process.



The explicit inclusion of a tobacco reduction target in the UN Sustainable Development Goals (Target 3A) makes it clear that this product poses a significant problem for sustainable global development. The scale of the environmental damage resulting from tobacco use, as described in this overview, makes clear how much more needs to be done both to monitor and counteract it. It also highlights the need for a collaborative approach to tobacco control. In the past few years, health and finance authorities have come together to use taxation as a highly successful form of tobacco control. Similar efforts could be made by environmental and health authorities, who already collaborate on shared concerns such as air pollution. A united response is a strong response.

Most importantly, the environmental consequences of tobacco consumption move it from being an individual problem to being a human problem. It is not just about the lives of smokers and those around them, or even those involved in tobacco production. What is now at stake is the fate of an entire planet. Only global action will create a solution for this global problem, and this overview aims to catalyze such action.

Foreword

by Dr Vera Luiza da Costa e Silva, Head of the WHO FCTC Secretariat



The alarming rise in tobacco consumption and related deaths has turned the battle for tobacco control from one focused primarily on educating a sceptical public about tobacco's health threat to one involving public engagement on much broader fronts – including on the subject of this overview: the severe and noxious effects of tobacco on the environment.

The articles and guidelines of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC) anticipate precisely this need to act simultaneously on multiple issues. Under Article 18 of the treaty, Parties “agree to have due regard to the protection of the environment and the health of persons in relation to the environment in respect of tobacco cultivation and manufacture within their respective territories”.

This overview is the result of a decision by the WHO FCTC's governing body, the Conference of the Parties (COP) at its 2016 meeting in Delhi, to invite WHO to consider the environmental impact of the tobacco life cycle. It has been completed with commendable speed by WHO, providing a very useful summary which will be invaluable in informing future action. It is, as the authors acknowledge, the first step on a path to date largely neglected, and which now requires greater attention.

The overview highlights the current lack of scientific research into the environmental impact of tobacco, including the health and economic consequences that result from the cultivation, production, distribution, and waste of what is a highly addictive and unnecessary product. The costs of such environmental damage are not always clear, leaving policy-makers often poorly informed on the true consequences of consumption. By omitting or minimizing these true costs, tobacco companies can effectively shift their responsibility to the taxpayer, and thus enjoy a hidden subsidy.

For example, cigarette manufacturing often involves long-distance distribution to other countries using diesel-powered lorries whose emissions have an established effect in causing cancer, heart attacks and strokes. The clean-up costs of tobacco waste, like discarded cigarette butts, is generally

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