

WORLD

Coronavirus threatens to undo gains on single-use plastics

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SEOUL — From the masks, gloves and gowns used on the front lines of the war against COVID-19 to food delivered in disposable plastic containers and coffee served in takeaway cups, single-use products are finding their way back into daily life in South Korea.

In the face of an unprecedented health crisis, it may be understandable that the impact of disposables on the Earth becomes an afterthought. But eco-minded citizens and activists are worried that people may settle into new life patterns and undo hard-won gains toward a greener economy.

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For An Seong-hyun, alarm bells ring whenever he takes out the trash. The 26-year-old college student, just like many Koreans, has stayed indoors as much as possible since the coronavirus outbreak started, heavily relying on delivery services for food and groceries.

“Every item that I ordered came in plastic containers, and I was taking out the trash at least twice as much as usual before the outbreak,” said An, a final-year student at Hanyang University in Seoul.

He added that he ordered food almost every day from nearby restaurants, many of which have started delivering food in plastic containers.

An is one of an increasing number of customers opting to order in. Woowa Brothers, operator of Korea's No. 1 food delivery app Baemin, saw the number of orders on the platform surge 66 percent on-year in February and 67 percent in March — higher than expected, as a result of the nationwide social distancing campaign.

The company said it doesn't have control over how its 140,000 partner businesses throughout the country package their food and beverages. Restaurants and cafes are increasingly choosing to pack items in disposable plastic boxes because customers worry about catching the virus from dishes someone else has used.

Those restaurants and cafes are backed by the government, which temporarily relaxed a ban on disposable packaging. Korea in February opened up regulatory leeway for restaurants and cafes to reintroduce plastic and paper cups for in-store customers until the virus outbreak is brought under control.

In May last year, the country introduced a rule banning the use of plastic cups for in-store customers at all cafes in response to the massive plastic waste crisis that ensued after China halted imports of plastic waste early in 2019.

The overall amount of waste collected in recent months has not changed drastically compared with the same period a year earlier, according to preliminary data from the Ministry of Environment.

However, the amount of household waste has been on the rise since the virus reached the peninsula.

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“The amount of trash from regular households has certainly increased, but waste output from the industrial sector — meaning restaurants, factories and other businesses — dropped,” said Hong Su-yeol, head of Resource Recycle Consulting. “There is some sort of contradictory force working between the two sides.”

Environmental activists are worried that the weekslong liberty from green initiatives paved the way for people to permanently shift their lifestyles and disrupt Korea's progress toward a greener economy.

According to the environmental group Greenpeace, Korea in 2017 used 469,200 tons of plastic bags, 71,400 tons of plastic bottles and 45,900 tons of plastic cups. Plastic causes long-lasting pollution because it contains chemicals that do not break down after disposal.

The government had set its sights on cutting plastic waste in half by 2030 while increasing the recycling rate to 70 percent, from just 34 percent in 2018. It was looking to phase out colored plastic bottles and replace them with clear plastic this year, as colored plastic is harder to recycle.

“Some people might say this will be over by the time we are done with the coronavirus outbreak, but we don’t know that,” said Green Korea activist Heo Seung-eun in a phone interview.

“People could still prefer to have their coffee in paper or plastic cups, and delivered food could still come in plastic containers. Demand for disposable items can stay strong even if people start going out again.”

Activists urge the government to adopt a longer-term perspective and find ways to fight the virus more sustainably.

Many take issue with the way the elections took place last month, entirely at the cost of the environment.

More than 29 million citizens cast ballots at polls on April 15, using an estimated 58 million single-use gloves provided by election authorities as a precaution against COVID-19 infection. Voters were required to wear face masks, many of which were also single-use.

Earlier, local NGO Korea Zero Waste Movement said if the disposable gloves used for the election were piled on top of each other, that pile might be 1.7 kilometers high — as tall as seven 63 Buildings, referring to a skyscraper in Seoul. The group said at the time that voters should be allowed to bring their own gloves from home instead.

[Several petitions were posted on Cheong Wa Dae’s website calling for a ban on the use of plastic gloves during the election.](#)

“From what we know, another virus outbreak could arrive here later, and the current way of using more disposable items is not going to sell,” Heo added.

“The government needs to come up with guidelines that can direct people to refrain from using disposable items but at the same time stay healthy and prevent themselves from catching or spreading the virus.”

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