

### **New regulations allowing manufacture, import of flat polythene bags criticised**

ISLAMABAD: Environmentalists have criticised new regulations banning polythene bags in the capital because it will allow for flat polythene bags to be imported and manufactured.

However, Pakistan Environment Protection Agency (Pak-EPA) Director General Farzana Altaf Shah has said the regulations are a ‘gift’ for Islamabad residents, and will be imposed on June 5, the first day of Eid.

According to a draft of the Pak-EPA Ban on (Manufacturing, Import, Sale, Purchase, Storage and Usage) Polythene Bag Regulations 2019 available with Dawn, the regulations will extent to the Islamabad Capital Territory.

The draft states: “All manufacturing, import and wholesale trading of polythene bags shall be banned from 5th June, 2019.

“All sale, purchase, supply, trade, storage, distribution and use of polythene bags shall be banned from 14th August, 2019.”

However, section IV states that the manufacturing or import of flat polythene bags will be permitted for industrial packing, primary industrial packing, municipal waste, hospital waste and hazardous waste.

Dr Imran Khalid, an environmentalist associated with the Sustainable Development Policy Institute, told Dawn that he supports the ban on polythene bags because they choke waterways and do not decompose for hundreds of years since they are not biodegradable.

“Moreover, those bags are hazardous and are banned in a number of countries. However, allowing the import and manufacturing of flat polythene bags have created doubts in the minds of a number of stakeholders.

“Although a meeting was held at the Ministry of Climate Change in which some people gave their input, I believe detailed deliberation should be held because those regulations may be adopted by the provinces at a later stage,” he said.

“The second issue is that there can be Western interests of some elements who want to introduce flat polythene bags in the market. I suggest that there should be a waste management policy in Pakistan. As the regulations are being implemented in a hurry, I fear they may not be fruitful,” Dr Khalid said.

Munir Ahmed, who also works on environmental issues, said the proposed regulations have two parts.

The first part explicitly bans all types of plastic bags from June 5, with a cut-off date for a complete ban on the sale of use of plastic bags within the jurisdiction of the ICT, which was welcomed.

“The second part of the same legislation intends to authorise the plastic industry to manufacture or import flat polythene bags for general consumption too. It would open new doors to the bigger menace to play havoc to our environment. These bags are already being used for industrial packing, municipal and hospital waste. Those bags are thick and will take more time to decompose as compared to bags which are currently being used,” he said.

Pak-EPA does not have the jurisdiction to take over the licensing authority for manufacturers or importers of flat polythene bags, Mr Ahmed added.

He suggested increasing the import of craft paper on subsidised duty to make paper bags of different weightage for different kinds of general consumption. He said cottage industry, particularly women, need to be encouraged to produce fabric bags of different sorts if the government is genuinely interested in banning the plastic menace.

Ms Shah from the Pak-EPA told Dawn that these are regulations, rather than a bill which would be tabled in parliament, which the Pak-EPA is authorised to bring.

“We have sent the draft to the Ministry of Law and Justice, and after it is vetted it will be sent to the federal cabinet for approval, and it will be implemented through a statutory regulatory order,” she said.

In response to a question, she said that flat polythene are used by a number of business centres, including garment shops. She added that branded clothing is also packed in flat polythene bags that do not bear brand names.

“There are four types of flat polythene bags in the market and we need to regulate them. We cannot completely ban them because otherwise it will become a huge problem to store garbage from houses and hospital waste. Currently, a number of items are being sold in polythene bags, such are chips, which will also be banned and companies will have to use biodegradable material for packing,” she said.

Last week, Prime Minister’s Adviser on Climate Change Malik Amin Aslam had said that the ministry was determined to ban plastic bags and would find the way to do so even if it had to take legislation up with parliament. He had asked the industry, media and civil society for their full support to make Pakistan a plastic-free society.

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