

Transcript – Deadly Industry: Challenging Big Tobacco – Ep. 7, S.1

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Louis

Welcome to Deadly Industry: Challenging Big Tobacco, a weekly podcast from the Tobacco Control Research Group at the University of Bath. We are an international and award-winning group that investigates the tactics used by Big Tobacco to maximise its profits at the expense of public health. The evidence we produce helps society to hold this deadly industry to account.

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Multiple speakers

The health issues are massive. Globally, each year, tobacco kills 9 million people. That's the equivalent of wiping out the population of London each year. Corporations are out for profit. Anything that is going to harm those profits is going to be unpalatable to them. This is a massive issue globally because if you look at global deaths just four corporate products, cause between a third and two thirds of all global deaths.

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Louis

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Louis

In this episode, we're going to be discussing the environmental impacts of the tobacco industry, an industry that is a major contributor to both human and environmental damage. In fact, the entire lifecycle of tobacco products is damaging to the environment, from farming to manufacturing to littering. I'm joined today by Dr. Rosemary Hiscock, a research associate at the University of Bath working within the Tobacco Control Research Group. Thank you for joining me. So, Rosemary, let's start at the beginning, I suppose.

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What are some of the tobacco related activities that you would consider to be a threat to the environment?

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Rosemary

Well I think it's important to start by looking at the people who are involved in the tobacco supply chain and what they say. So, some of the farmers who are involved in tobacco growing have talked about the chemicals that are involved. So, one of these farmers said there was one chemical that was given to us by tobacco company for the seedbeds, and that chemical was extremely poisonous.

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And you see, these seedbeds are prepared on the riverside, and you can imagine the danger that it causes if there is rain and water run out to the river. So they're basically saying that the chemicals supplied by the tobacco company, can then infiltrate the river and make it polluted. Other tobacco farmers have talked about the problems of deforestation from tobacco growing

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and they've talked about fuel wood scarcity, soil erosion, less water available and more erratic weather patterns, and that was in Malawi. And in

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Tanzania, they've talked about loss of natural house building materials, loss of medicinal plants and honey and that some people whose livelihoods used to depend on the things in the forest, they can't have those livelihoods anymore.

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Louis

That's really interesting. So that's looking right at the start of the supply chain presumably then. So that's the farmers who are producing the tobacco

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and you're seeing

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some of these examples of environmental damage there. Just

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stepping back for a moment,

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as an industry would you consider tobacco to be particularly damaging to environment across its supply chain?

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Rosemary

Yes, it is particularly damaging. So, for every 300 cigarettes that are produced, there's one tree cut down and you might think, well, that's not very much, but in 2023 there were over 5 trillion cigarettes sold so then that's a huge number of trees.

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Louis

And these trees are cut down for planting presumably?

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Rosemary

There's various things that they're cut down for. They're cut down for planting new tobacco fields. They're cut down for curing the tobacco when it's grown. And they're also cut down for matches to light the cigarettes.

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Louis

Could you explain a bit more about what tobacco curing actually is?

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Rosemary

So when they, tobacco has these huge green leaves, but they actually, they aren't appropriate for making the crop and they'll rot away. So what they have to do is they have to heat them or dry them out. And there's different ways of curing, but there's, quite a bit of the tobacco is cured in by flue curing

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and that means that a fire is lit and then the heat goes through chimneys into a barn and the leaves get cured that way. And then there's dark tobacco that's often used for pipes or cigar tobacco. And that's actually, there's a fire in the room with the tobacco leaves.

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Louis

So presumably that has some kind of environmental impact, too, in terms of emissions?

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Rosemary

Yes, they're responsible for climate change emissions.

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Louis

So these are some of the effects from the farming itself on the environment. Do we also see effects on the people doing the farming on the farmers themselves?

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Rosemary

Yes the farmers themselves, so tobacco is an unusual crop in that actually handling the tobacco can actually make people ill. So that's called green tobacco sickness. So working with tobacco is the equivalent of smoking 50 cigarette cigarettes a day and then that can cause things like vomiting, feeling dizzy and then people sometimes think it's, they've got malaria, but actually when it turns out they go to the hospital it's actually to do with the tobacco growing.

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Louis

I mean, that sounds horrific. Are there? Is this being addressed by tobacco companies or by regulators?

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Rosemary

Tobacco companies say they provide PPE, but actually on the ground it seems that this is patchy at best or the farmers have to pay for it themselves. And from our experience of Covid, we all know that actually PPE is difficult and uncomfortable to wear.

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Louis

Yeah. Wearing that all day in a hot field I expect isn't ideal.

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So you mentioned there, Rosemary, this issue of soil degradation and chemical leaching. What are some of these chemicals? Why are they such a problem?

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Rosemary

Tobacco is a crop that requires a lot of nutrients to grow. So that means that exhausts the soil of its own nutrients very quickly. So then farmers have to either cut down more trees to create a new field, or they have to add fertiliser. So tobacco compared with maize needs 2.5 times the nitrogen, 7 times the phosphorus and 8 times the potassium.

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And it's within the top ten crops for fertiliser. So it's needing a lot of chemicals because in addition to fertiliser it also needs pesticides. Because there's particular insects that attack tobacco crops and because they're often grown in large fields of just tobacco that makes them more vulnerable.

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Louis

So would you say that as an agricultural crop, because obviously in other industrialised farming we see similar problems, would you say that tobacco is particularly bad for these kinds of chemical issues?

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Rosemary

Yes. It does appear that the tobacco is using a lot more of these chemicals.

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Louis

So moving on from, tobacco production, what's the next step in the chain? And maybe we can talk about some of the environmental impacts at that stage.

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Rosemary

Well, tobacco, first of all, it goes to be processed generally, quite locally in leaf processing centres but then it goes to the big factories, which can be located on the other side of the world, depending on what blend of tobacco leaves are required. So this requires a huge amount of transport which has its own emissions, so often transported by sea

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and then the cargo shipping is known for being large producer of emissions.

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Louis

So this transport that's coming from the tobacco fields, which are typically where in the world?

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Rosemary

Most tobacco, more and more tobacco is now grown in low-and middle income countries.

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Louis

And that's moving, so places like, Central Africa presumably.

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Rosemary

Yeah so there's particular areas of the world where it seems to be concentrated. So that's southern and eastern Africa. So places like Zimbabwe, Malawi and there's Brazil in South America, and then there's Indonesia, Philippines, and also India and China are big growers and the United States as well.

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Louis

And then they are shipping that in massive quantities to these places

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to start the manufacturing process. Whereabouts is that happening?

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Rosemary

Well, manufacturing is actually happens all over the world, there's little factories and big but there's particularly big factories that are it concentrated in Eastern Europe so a lot of tobacco goes there and Turkey and China as well.

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Louis

Right so it's a huge global network of producing a lot of emissions, presumably.

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Rosemary

That's right.

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Louis

Yeah, right. So once they arrive at these factories, what happens to the tobacco leaf then?

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Rosemary

So, they so it can be blended, flavoured and then it's, and then its transformed into various tobacco products and the most common product is obviously cigarettes. and then the issue with cigarettes is that then it is not just the tobacco itself, then they have to add flavours and they add paper and they add filters to that.

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So that's using up more of the world's resources.

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Louis

So the production of these, the components of a cigarette, you got the tobacco, the paper, the filter. Of these components, which of those are particularly damaging?

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Rosemary

Well paper is obviously using trees and it's using trees for something that is completely unnecessary and actually detrimental to health and well-being. So there's obviously limited land in the world for forests and it would be much better if those forest were used for things that were positive and going to bring well-being.

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Louis

And how about the filters? Because I'm guessing that they must be plastic.

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Rosemary

So, filters are plastic, but actually the plastic is made from cellulose, so plant or wood material, but that doesn't necessarily mean that's a good thing because they still are using a lot of different energy and chemicals in the process to change, transform, the wood or plant material into the cellulose acetate.

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Louis

So they're producing a plastic from the plant. So it's similar to the paper in that it's tree usage. And do the filters, like we hear with other plastics that they can stay in the environment for a very long time. Is that the case with cigarette filters?

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Rosemary

Yeah. That's right. Yeah. There's the problem of biodegradability and exactly what that means which is a bit of an issue. So when we talk about something being degradable, it just means it breaks down into tiny component parts but and anything will degrade eventually, cigarette filters take longer than some other things because they're made of this plastic

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so they can take over two years would be normal. And quite a lot seem to be taking over ten years. So then that's unsightly. So there's a lot of filter companies getting, having a lot of exciting marketing and blurb about how they're producing more biodegradable filters. But actually that is not the real issue.

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The real issue with filters is that they absorb the nicotine and 800 other chemicals from the pesticides growing the tobacco leaf and then the process of making the cigarettes. And then when they're in the ground then these leach into the soil and they turn out to be damaging to plants and soil and aquatic animals as well when they get into the water.

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Louis

Right. That's fascinating. So that's a specific damage caused by tobacco, not just the plastic itself.

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Rosemary

That's right. Yeah. So it doesn't really matter how long it takes to degrade if it's still leaching out.

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Louis

Some ways the quicker it degrades the worse it is for...

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Rosemary

It could be, yeah.

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Louis

The other aspect I suppose of cigarette manufacture is in the packaging that these go into. I'm guessing that these must have fairly hefty environmental impacts too?

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Rosemary

Yes, it's four miles of paper every hour to wrap and package cigarettes.

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Louis

That really is an incredible amount of paper.

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That's across the industry, that's how the paper is being used?

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Rosemary

Yeah.

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Louis

Wow.

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So once you've produced this product, cigarettes in their packaging, and all the impacts of that, we've mentioned a bit about filters and the issues of breakdown of that. A lot of this comes under this banner of post-consumer waste, right? So maybe you could explain what we mean by that.

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Rosemary

I would say that post-consumer waste is after the cigarette has been smoked, so after the tobacco product has been used. So then you have what's left over, which is the end of the cigarette, which contains the filter. So that's not smoked away, which is why it's then left with the smoker and it's something that's hot

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so that makes it very easy to want to dispose of it immediately by littering.

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Louis

Right, so this is, you know, the classic discarded cigarette

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that you squash down with your shoe on the street.

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Rosemary

Yeah, that's a massive problem. There's 4.5 trillion cigarette butts littered every year and there's various estimates that converge on about 75% of cigarette butts being discarded as litter. And then they make up about 19% to 38% of all litter. And then they're not just litter because they're hot, they're a fire risk, which is when we're in the era now of forest, huge forest fires

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we don't want anything that's going to risk that happening more.

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Louis

Of course. So are there any signs of this, are there any trends in this amount of litter in an environment to waste is increasing or is it going down? I mean, obviously in in the West we've seen some reducing smoking rates, but is that the same globally or...

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Rosemary

I haven't, I haven't seen, any evidence that suggests to me that it's reducing and then the main problem with it is that the tobacco industry isn't, doesn't seem to be being effective at clearing it up. So it means that it's left to the local authorities, who is really funded by the local taxpayer to clear up their litter.

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Louis

And of course, that's not to mention, presumably some of the impacts of these newer products we're now seeing. And I think we'll come onto that a bit later, maybe. But before we do that, I see that the paper you co-authored said that filters are considered the biggest fraud of our time. Is this to do with the environment?

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What does that mean? Maybe you could tell us a bit about that piece of research.

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Rosemary

So it's really actually not about the environmental, it's about some of the other impacts of filters. So in the 1950s, researchers in the UK and the US linked tobacco and cigarettes to lung cancer. And it was about that time that the tobacco industry began a big marketing campaigns about filters in which

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the advert said that

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that filters hold throat irritants in check which kind of implies that they're keeping smoking healthier and it actually makes a cigarette easier to smoke. So actually the problem was that then more people smoked because it was easier to smoke and then they had the idea that it was less damaging.

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So actually in that period, this led to increased lung cancer incidence and deaths and then there was also accidental consumption of filters, which could also cause problems. So in fact, so filters were kind of meant to be this thing to make cigarettes healthier. But they're a fraud because they're actually making cigarettes more dangerous.

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Louis

So did the industry know that this was the case? Presumably that's part of that fraud accusation.

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Rosemary

I think there's various things in their documents that do suggest that they did know that.

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Louis

So filters, that's an interesting one. So they have this this dual impact of increasing the sort of desirability and smoke ability, if you want to call it that, of cigarettes. And also this knock on environmental effect.

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Rosemary

Yeah and they've also been used to get around the menthol ban in the EU. So, filters have been introduced with a hollow which people can use, can put in a flavoured capsule and then they can continue to smoke flavoured cigarettes.

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Louis

So that's the ban on menthol flavoured cigarettes which has been imposed in the EU and is also in.

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Rosemary

the UK as well

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Louis

The UK too. And there's discussions in the US, I believe.

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Rosemary

Yeah.

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Louis

We mentioned this before, we touched on the idea of newer products. Obviously we've talked a lot about the supply chain of traditional cigarettes, which is what most people think of when they think of the tobacco industry. I think now though that is starting to change, the more you look at the news, the more we see issues of youth vaping.

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We see disposable vapes and e-cigarettes. I mean, you see them on the street. If you go walking around

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littering the roads, what are some of the issues around these new products in the market

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and the threat they pose to the environment?

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Rosemary

The new products, they use plastic so therefore they're using up fossil fuels and they are contributing to climate change with the emissions to make the plastics. And then there's the problem of what you do with the plastics afterwards. So there's plastics and then they also have electronic components so there's all the different chemicals, particularly lithium, which is used in that

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and we absolutely desperately need the lithium

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to increase the use of batteries. So for example, in electric cars, where it appears that a lot of lithium is now being diverted to e-cigarettes.

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Louis

So my understanding of lithium for batteries was this was for kind of modern rechargeable, as you say, car type batteries. Why is this being used in an e-cigarette?

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Rosemary

Well it's the way of heating the e-liquid, which, then gives off a vapour, which then is used to transfer nicotine to the human body.

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Louis

So lithium is the power source in the battery essentially.

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Rosemary

Yeah.

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Louis

And so with some of these newer products, maybe we could define a bit what we mean by newer products and e-cigarettes I mean obviously there's different types. What are some of the kind of worst offenders in terms of environmental impact?

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Rosemary

Well e-cigarettes are particularly bad because they have the plastic, the electronic heating component and the batteries. And that's the same for heated tobacco products. Heated tobacco products even have tobacco leaf in and so that increases their similarity to cigarettes which are obviously very dangerous.

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Louis

So heated tobacco products, that's a heating device with a small amount of leaf tobacco. That's correct isn't it.

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Some of these, especially in the UK, we've seen more discussions around disposable e-cigarettes in particular. I mean presumably that's a different risk profile to the environment than a reusable e-cigarette?

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Rosemary

Yeah. So the disposable e-cigarettes they are called disposable because you're meant to dispose of them after one single use. But that doesn't mean they break down. So the lithium instead of being taken and recycled is often not put into the recycling at all, it's quite difficult to get the battery out of a disposable e-cigarette.

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Louis

So there's the UK tobacco and vaping bill that's being discussed in UK Parliament at the moment. Is that part of that consideration? Is this environmental impact and the potential ban on these disposable e-cigarettes?

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Rosemary

Well I've actually been looking in that bill recently and actually that bill brings in quite a few measures to do with e-cigarettes, but the environmental aspect, so the banning of the disposable cigarettes, is actually being done by a different bill, which is under Defra because they're the environmental... So actually that is quite fortunate because the Tobacco and Vapes Bill was dropped at the end of at the end of the Conservative lead government

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whereas is the bill for banning the disposable cigarettes is already in place. But then that won't come in until 2025 so the disposables are still being sold at the moment, and there's very little in place for recycling. So and then there's, within this last, within the last year, there's 360 million of them being sold.

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And so that's equivalent to 6700 electric vehicles but 90% of the vape producers are failing on their environmental regulations.

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Louis

We've sort of touched on there this idea of regulation and how as societies and governments, we might tackle some of this environmental impact. But what are the obligations here for the tobacco companies? Obviously when there's regulation brought in place, they have to accord with that,

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but are there not already certain legal obligations for protecting the environment?

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Rosemary

There has been very, very little in place to do with an environmental thing, historically.

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Louis

So if there's little legislation already in place to deal with the environmental impact of tobacco products, what are the tobacco companies doing, are they just ignoring the issue? Are they talking about the environment? What's their response at the moment?

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Rosemary

So the tobacco companies are actually talking a lot about the environment. They have dedicated web pages with lots of beautiful pictures and green themes, and they have special reports on their environmental activities or they've changed their annual reports to become integrated reports so they talk about what they're doing on the environmental, environmental metrics, along with their financial metrics.

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Louis

So is this part of this an expectation on companies in general beyond on tobacco to be responsive to some of these environmental issues? Are they not just fulfilling that brief?

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Rosemary

Well, there has been very little in play. So it seems to be that they're particularly focussed on this and trying and winning prizes on various and awards for various kind of, bodies who are interested in how companies are doing.

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Louis

What sort of prizes they're winning?

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Rosemary

Well, they're kind of, the top companies for their CSR activities and their environmental, social and governance activities but there's big questions about the veracity and the integrity of what's being awarded there. So, the information that they're providing, it's very kind of biased to do particular things that makes them look good, rather than what actually would solve the environmental problems that they're causing.

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Louis

So that's the sort of information that those companies are providing on their websites or in their reports. Yeah. So what's in it for them in starting to talk about this. I mean if, if as you say, they are massive polluters, why would they want to draw attention to these green issues?

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Rosemary

Well, they want to control the narrative. So they want to be the ones saying what's going on so people don't dig underneath and find out what's really going on. So they portray themselves as, socially responsible with their activities. So for them they have kind of two groups of people that they're trying to impress.

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The first is, their shareholders and potential shareholders. So people kind of may think, well, the tobacco industry, is very bad so they won't be interested in buying shares, but if they can suggest that they're actually very good, then they appeal to a wider group of shareholders. And then the other group is government,

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when they're trying to set up a factory or they're trying to, put in farming, that sort of thing. So for those people, they're trying to say, look, we're actually going to be doing good things for you if you let us build a factory, whereas actually they're

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probably not, they're actually probably going to be undermining

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environmental and

00:26:16:11 - 00:26:17:12

public health.

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Louis

So if they

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invest in projects or talk about these kind of green issues or invest in environmental projects, that improves their image to a certain degree, which kind of gives them benefits for their profitability presumably?

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Rosemary

Yes, that's the idea. So they're greenwashing, is what they're doing.

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Louis

Greenwashing. Yeah. That's a term we hear a lot more these days in the news. Could you just give us a definition of what you mean by that?

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Rosemary

So basically greenwashing is basically taking an activity and then making it sound much more environmentally friendly than it actually is.

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Louis

I see, yeah. So are there any examples you've got, of tobacco companies doing this?

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Rosemary

So a recent one is a project in Zambia where JTI and BAT who are two of the big tobacco companies are stakeholders, and it's being run by a fuel distributor in Zambia and it's to do with tree planting, but obviously they're cutting down so many trees, that that's why they're trying to build them up again.

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But the wildlife value of the forest is much better if it's undisturbed woodlands rather than any sort of replanted woodland. And quite often, instead of it being indigenous trees, they'll plant things that can be cut down quickly for fuel. So that won't necessarily be any good for local wildlife.

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Louis

So would that count as a kind of offsetting, like carbon offsetting, something we hear more of?

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Rosemary

Yes, so in that Zambian project I talked about that was building up, indigenous... So that would be carbon, yeah it would be carbon offsetting.

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Louis

Are there any problems that you see with this kind of offsetting system?

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Rosemary

I think the real problem is that it's being run by company. So if then the government comes in and says, actually, we want to bring in public health legislation to control our tobacco consumption in our population, they'll say "oh, well we will stop doing the tree planting."

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Louis

Is there much of a kind of global appetite to address the industry and the damaging environmental impact it's having?

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Rosemary

There is more, there is a growing appetite for that, particularly in higher income countries at the moment, but I think it could spread to low- and middle income countries. So, the EU is putting in, puts in a single use plastic directive, and it's also in the middle of implementing a supply chain directive, which makes larger companies responsible for the environmental and human rights implications of their supply chains.

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Louis

So how can we prevent tobacco companies from interfering in this process of reducing the environmental impact?

00:29:17:24 - 00:29:53:12

Rosemary

I think it's important that the tobacco industry continues to be denormalised and not to have a place at the table so they don't get involved in the minutiae of developing the legislation. So this is, this has been a problem for the EU single use plastic directive where they were able to get a weakening of the legislation and say that filters were not banned within it, despite them being a single use plastic.

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Louis

Right. So they were interfering in that sort of regulatory process.

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Rosemary

Yeah.

00:29:58:14 - 00:30:00:12

Louis

To sway in favour of the industry.

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Rosemary

Yeah and then the other issue with that is, it's taking a while to implement, but France's has been ahead in the implementation, has actually unfortunately employed a tobacco funded group to be involved in the clean-up of the tobacco, of the cigarette ends or butts or the litter. So then that unfortunately gives them, power and, way of talking to the authority.

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So once they're talking to one type of authority, then they can start getting into more public health arena again.

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Louis

So in that case, is the government actually paying for the industry to be involved in the cleanup?

00:30:48:04 - 00:30:51:09

Rosemary

Yeah or an industry-linked body.

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Louis

Right, rather than the industry itself paying to clean up its own mess.

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Rosemary

Well, the industry is paying as well, but they're also involved in the cleanup. So it's very important that the industry pays. But they're not themselves the ones who are cleaning up, right?

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Louis

So that they can't use that as a kind of PR win for them.

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Rosemary

Yes. And also just to make relationships with public officials.

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Louis

I see, of course. So that's a part of the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control as well, isn't it? The idea that that separation between regulators and the industry.

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Rosemary

Yes, everything is kept to a minimum of interaction.

00:31:29:03 - 00:31:44:23

Louis

So in your view, Rosemary, we've talked a lot about the responsibility of manufacturers of the tobacco companies and the product waste. To what degree is their responsibility on what tobacco users, people who may be throwing the cigarette butts?

00:31:44:23 - 00:32:10:02

Rosemary

So traditionally, the only responsibility of a company is to its shareholders and so it's to make as much money to its shareholders as possible. So for example, just recently, Elon Musk is trying to sue companies for dropping their advertising with Twitter because he's saying by dropping the advertising they were reducing the profit for their shareholders

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so that is all that manufacturers in the past were responsible for. But when they began to be seen as doing environmental damage, that's when the CSR, sort of appeared on the agenda.

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Louis

That's corporate social responsibility, like charitable acts.

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Rosemary

Yeah, yeah, yeah. So, some of the things like tree planting that we covered, so they needed to justify their kind of environmental destruction, to show that they are doing things to help the environment and as part of that it wasn't, they weren't seen as needing to be responsible for their litter or anything else that happened afterwards

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so that was all to do with the users so an individual psychology but that allowed them to fund groups to help smokers tidy into litter. So things like Keep Britain tidy, Keep America tidy.

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Louis

So it benefits the industry, you're saying, to put the focus on the user rather than the collective responsibility of these companies and

00:33:24:17 - 00:33:24:24

Rosemary

Yeah.

00:33:24:24 - 00:33:25:20

Louis

the profits they're making.

00:33:25:24 - 00:33:45:10

Rosemary

Yeah. So that's been the traditional and they've done the same with farmers, that they blame farmers for not understanding how to look after the forest and things and blame them for deforestation, rather than the fact that they actually don't pay them enough for them to be able to afford to buy sustainable ways of curing.

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00:33:45:12 - 00:34:00:13

Louis

Well, thank you, Rosemary. It's been really fascinating hearing about this, because I think it will shock some people. I think people often know a lot about the health impacts of tobacco, I think it will shock some people to hear the massive environmental impacts, too. In your view, just to wrap things up, what's

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the one change that you'd like to see made to deal with this problem?

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Rosemary

Well, one of the things that could be done would be to ban filters

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because they are obviously bad for the environment, and they're encouraging people to smoke more.

00:34:14:18 - 00:34:21:13

Louis

Dr. Hiscock, thank you very much for joining us. And the sources, as always, for all of today's discussion can be found in the episode shownotes. We'll be back next week, where we'll be joined by Dr. Sophie Braznell to talk about how the tobacco industry influences science for profit.

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