



Plastic bag predicament: A threat to our environment and the urgency of reduction

Social Desk

EXCLUSIVE

Soudeh Najafi, the chairperson of the Health Committee of the Islamic Council of Tehran, underscored the importance of punctual waste collection across the city, acknowledging the persistent criticisms of the city's waste management practices.

Najafi discussed the committee's recent meeting with the waste management organization, referencing the fourth plan of Tehran Municipality. This plan, a cornerstone of urban justice and a key issue in the city's sixth management period, is heavily emphasized by the city council. The degree of its implementation is a reflection of the city management's performance in the eyes of the citizens, ISNA reported.

"The fourth plan for the transformation and development of Tehran, which was compiled based on the realization of urban justice, is one of the most important issues in the urban management of the sixth period," Najafi said. "The city council emphasizes its implementation and the degree of implementation of this program shows the record and performance of the city management in the eyes of the citizens."

Najafi reiterated the importance of timely waste collection, acknowledging the

criticisms that have been levied against the city's waste management organization. She urged the organization to adhere to relevant plans and orders to achieve the desired outcomes.

Addressing the issue of waste tanks in the city, Najafi noted that improperly placed tanks obstruct roads and contribute to traffic congestion. Additionally, waste and leachate spilling from these tanks create an unpleasant odor, posing a potential health risk to citizens.

Najafi, a member of the executive board of Tehran Islamic Council, highlighted the potential for waste to serve as a source of income. She expressed hope that the waste management organization would take significant measures in collaboration with knowledge-based companies to capitalize on this potential. Najafi also touched on the issue of child labor in waste collection, particularly among foreign nationals. She condemned the exploitation of children and teenagers by illegal agents and waste collection networks, advocating for the design of waste tanks that restrict easy access to their contents.

"A significant part of the amount of waste produced in Tehran is plastic, about 10 percent of which is related to plastic bags," Najafi said. "We need to take action to recycle these products."

Finally, Najafi addressed the

growing vermin problem in the city, particularly the prevalence of rats in the city's streams. She expressed hope that the waste management organization, in collaboration with other institutions, particularly water and sewage, would manage and control this issue effectively.

In light of the startling news, we should be mindful of the fact that in our current era where convenience often trumps conservation, the ubiquitous plastic bag has become a symbol of our throwaway culture and a major threat to our environment. This seemingly innocuous item, found in every corner store and supermarket across the globe, is contributing to an environmental crisis of epic proportions.

Plastic bags, lightweight and water-resistant, are favored by retailers and consumers alike for their convenience. However, their environmental impact is anything but lightweight. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Americans alone use over 380 billion plastic bags and wraps yearly, requiring 12 million barrels of oil to manufacture.

The problem lies not only in their production but also in their disposal. Plastic bags are non-biodegradable, meaning they do not break down naturally in the environment. Instead, they slowly fragment into smaller pieces, or micro-

plastics, which can persist for hundreds to thousands of years. These microplastics infiltrate every corner of our ecosystem, from the deepest ocean trenches to the most remote mountain peaks.

Marine life is particularly vulnerable to plastic pollution. The United Nations reports that over 800 species worldwide are affected by marine debris, and as much as 80 percent of that litter is plastic. Sea creatures often mistake plastic bags for food, leading to blockages, starvation, and ultimately, death. The plastic ingested by marine life can also make its way up the food chain, posing potential health risks to humans.

On land, plastic bags litter landscapes, clog waterways, and contribute to landfill overflow. They are carried by the wind, often ending up in places where they pose a threat to wildlife and natural habitats. In urban areas, discarded plastic bags can block drains, exacerbating flood risks.

The plastic bag problem is not just an environmental issue; it's an economic one too. The World Bank estimates that the global economy loses \$80 billion to \$120 billion annually due to improper plastic waste management. This includes the costs of waste collection, the economic impact of tourism loss due to litter, and the potential income lost when recyclable materials are discarded

rather than recovered.

So, what's the solution? Reduction is the first step. Many cities and countries have implemented plastic bag bans or fees, encouraging consumers to bring reusable bags. Businesses are also exploring alternatives to traditional plastic bags, such as those made from biodegradable materials or recycled content.

However, policy and industry changes alone are not enough. Public education about the environmental impact of plastic bags and the benefits of reusable alternatives is crucial. Consumers have the power to drive change through their purchasing decisions and habits. Recycling is another part of the solution, but it's not as simple as it seems. Only a small fraction of plastic bags are recycled, often due to contamination, sorting challenges, and a lack of recycling facilities. Innovations in recycling technology and infrastructure are needed to improve this rate.

The plastic bag predicament is a complex issue that requires a multifaceted approach. It's a challenge that involves governments, businesses, and individuals alike. But with concerted effort and a commitment to change, it's a challenge that we can overcome. After all, the



health of our planet and future generations depends on it.

So does the health of our city, Tehran, and its current and future dwellers. We, as aspiring green citizens should take immediate steps to reduce our use of plastic bags. It could serve us well to remember that less than 50 years ago or so, Tehran-dwellers and Iranians all over the country used a reusable item called zambil, a big basket which they carried whenever they went shopping. Let us bring that lost tradition back.