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What do we do about plastics?

EDITORIAL

PRIME MINISTER JUSTIN TRUDEAU says that if his government wins re-election in October, one of its efforts will be to legislate a ban on single-use plastics.

Only time will tell whether Mr. Trudeau's announcement is, as Conservative leader Andrew Scheer contends, merely a ploy to turn voters' attention away from recent scandals, or whether the promise will go the way of the electoral reforms promised four years ago.

However, there's surely no doubt that single-use plastics pose a serious environmental problem, with growing evidence that huge quantities of disposed plastics are being consumed by whales and other inhabitants of the oceans.

Mr. Trudeau said Monday that the federal government will ban ?harmful, single-use plastics? such as grocery bags, straws, cutlery, plates and stir sticks, as soon as 2021.

The long-simmering issue is receiving more attention these days thanks to publication of images of sea birds and fish choked by plastic refuse that flows down rivers in developing countries, gets caught in the currents of the Pacific and is carried around the planet. According to a 2015 study, about eight million tonnes of plastic waste that starts on land ends up in the oceans every year.

As well, there is China's decision last year to stop the import of most types of used plastic commodities for recycling. Other developing countries are following suit, and as a result governments across Canada are running out of places to send their recyclables. This is forcing up their costs and obliging them to send more plastics to landfills and incinerators.

According to a study done for the federal government, only 9 per cent of the 3.2 million tonnes of plastic waste generated each year in Canada is currently being recycled.

Last week, the Ontario government named a special adviser on plastic waste and told him to report back by August on how best to transfer recycling costs currently borne by municipal taxpayers to the companies that make and use single-use plastic products.

The challenge facing governments is immense, partly because of the rapid growth in the production of single-use plastics. By one estimate, consumption is doubling every decade, and half of all plastics ever manufactured were made in the last 15 years.

The problem is that plastic water bottles, forks and stir sticks that are used for the time it takes to eat lunch then live on for up to 400 years.

While Mr. Trudeau wants to ban single-use plastics, he also says he doesn't want to put anyone out of work.

A better plan is the one Ontario is considering, and which is already working well in British Columbia. There, large food retailers and consumer packaged-goods companies are entirely responsible for the cost of recycling.

Doing so takes a load off of taxpayers while encouraging companies to use less plastic or to find biodegradable alternatives. And it could help develop a recycling industry in Canada and eliminate the need to ship waste overseas.

As we see it, part of the solution would involve requiring all producers of 500 mL and larger plastic water bottles to follow the lead of Ice River Springs in Feversham and build plants similar to the Blue Mountain Plastics facility in Shelburne, with a capacity to recycle all their plastic bottles.

An alternative that might be considered would be imposition of deposits on all the bottles as a means of encouraging consumers to

return the bottles rather than just place them in blue boxes.

Shopping bags may present a greater challenge, but we see no reason why our supermarkets couldn't follow the lead of the Liquor Control Board of Ontario and switch to paper bags, with customers still able to use plastic, but only in the form of reusable bags.

We suspect that plastic straws could be fairly easily replaced by paper ones, at least until someone comes up with biodegradable options.