

Briefing-paper

# Pocket ashtrays: for better or worse?

Dossier #1 Greenwashing | June 2022

# Contents

Introduction **03**

**01.** A few facts **04**

**02.** The cigarette butt is  
not the only culprit **06**

**03.** The tobacco industry  
wears green to shirk their  
responsibilities **09**

**04.** Potential solutions? **12**

# Introduction

Environmental issues linked to tobacco are not limited to the littering of cigarette butts. They involve the entire production chain, from growing tobacco to the final consumption of tobacco products. In this way, the tobacco industry is responsible for the environmental damage caused by the products and their manufacturing. The "Lara Green" campaign, launched in 2021 by the Swiss Cigarette association (which represents the Swiss branches of British American Tobacco Switzerland, Japan Tobacco International and Philip Morris International), attempts to give this polluting industry a 'greener' and more ecological image. Beyond this, the campaign is part of a strategy to shift responsibility from the producer to smokers, while gathering huge amounts of data on consumers for undisclosed reasons. It has never been more important to inform consumers about the tobacco manufacturers' role in the creation of waste from tobacco products. And it has never been more necessary to encourage political support for measures that aim to keep producers accountable and require the industry to manage the waste it generates.

# 01.A few facts

Frequently regarded as worthless waste, cigarette butts account for two-thirds of litter. However, it takes the butts up to 15 years to degrade, largely due to the filter, which accounts for the main cause of the pollution from cigarette ends. The filter, the part that takes longest to degrade, is composed of synthetic materials that increase microplastic pollution. These plastics mean that even when properly disposed of, a cigarette butt pollutes. Yet this fact that does not seem to alarm the tobacco industry, with a million tons of cigarette filters produced each year according to the industry's own reporting.

Up to  
**15 years**

for a cigarette butt  
to degrade



**1 million**  
tons of  
cigarette filters  
produced every year

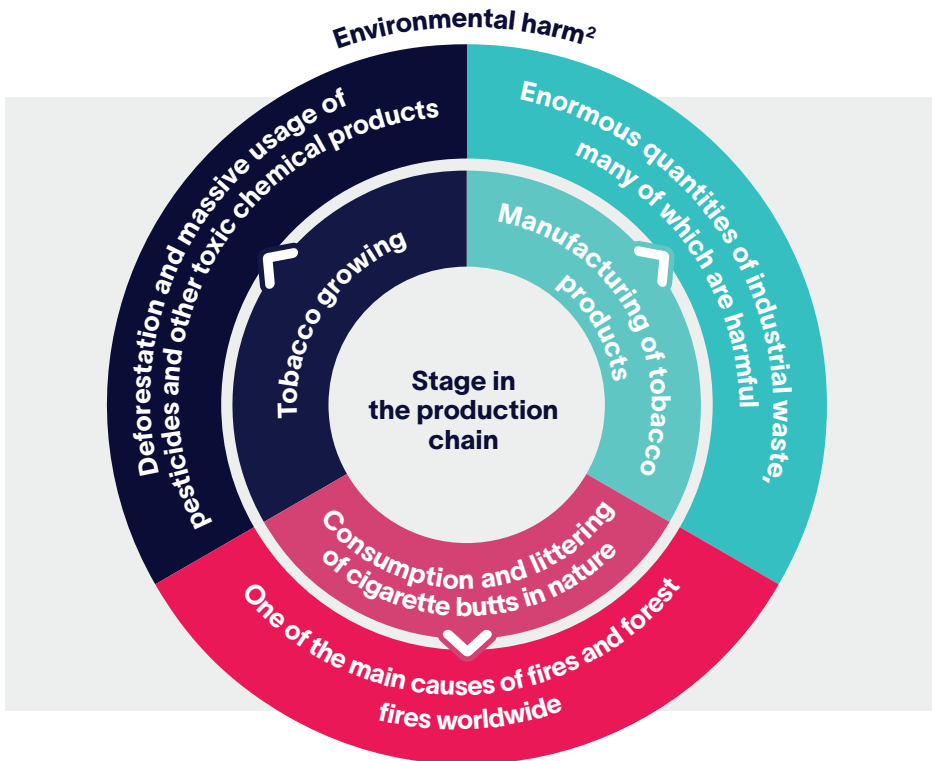


According to an article in *Tobacco Control*<sup>1</sup>, “Filters and innovations to filters have been consistently marketed as a means to reduce smoking-related health risks, with the very name ‘*filter*’ suggesting reduced harm”, and yet “the overwhelming majority of independent research shows that filters do not reduce the harms associated with smoking”. “In fact, filters may increase the harms caused by smoking by enabling smokers to inhale smoke more deeply into their lungs”.

<sup>1</sup> <http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/tobaccocontrol-2020-056245>

## 02. The cigarette butt is not the only culprit

Environmental issues related to tobacco production are not limited to the littering of cigarette butts, they involve the **entire production chain**, from cultivation to consuming the end product.



In a study published in 2019 in *Tobacco Control*<sup>3</sup>, entitled “Butting out: an analysis of measures to address tobacco product waste”, researchers from New Zealand published the results of a study

<sup>2</sup> <https://tobaccoatlas.org/topic/environment>

<sup>3</sup> <http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/tobaccocontrol-2019-054956>

carried out on a selection of smokers and non-smokers on tobacco product waste. As part of the results, the authors indicated: “Most respondents saw butt litter as toxic to the environment and held smokers primarily responsible for creating tobacco product waste. When knowledge of butt non-biodegradability increased, so too did the proportion holding tobacco companies responsible for tobacco product waste.”

## ➔ Who is responsible?

Based on the “polluter-payer” principle, the **Extended Producer Responsibility (ERP)** environmental policy approach plays an increasing role in democracies in the management of environmental issues.

It places the responsibility on producers – financial and physical – to eliminate their products after they have been consumed.

In particular, **producers are responsible for the environmental damage** proven to be caused by their products. Producers must cover the costs linked to gathering, recycling or the elimination of their manufactured products. Producers must also provide information on the environmental risks of their products being put on the market.

The principle of ERP extends to tobacco product producers in certain countries, as for example in France. One can imagine that the movement in favour of ERP implementation is part of the reason Swiss Cigarette was prompted to launch the “Lara Green” campaign (see below). Tobacco producers are now seeking to avoid the application of the ERP principle in Switzerland.



# 03. The tobacco industry wears green to shirk their responsibilities

## ➤ The Lara Green campaign

Swiss Cigarette, an association representing the Swiss branches of British American Tobacco Switzerland (BAT), Japan Tobacco International (JTI) and Philip Morris International (PMI), launched the Lara Green campaign in May 2021. According to the association, the campaign aims to reinforce its commitment to a clean environment by distributing pocket ashtrays, to raise awareness on the devastating role of littering.

The key message of this campaign: "The environment is not an ashtray. Dispose of your cigarette butts correctly!"





In reality, it is a strategy that aims to shift responsibility from the producer to the smoker, while also seeking, beyond the marketing approach, to gather information about consumers. More than 10,000 contact data sets were collected by Swiss Cigarette through the ordering of 20,000 of their pocket ashtrays. It is therefore reasonable to ask what this contact information will be used for.

**10'000**  
**contact data sets**  
collected from smokers



## ➤ Why a pocket ashtray?

In 1984, J. B. Winnacott patented a pocket ashtray, explaining the advantages his invention could have for the tobacco industries<sup>4</sup> :

- "A great image builder for the cigarette industry."
- "A new inexpensive advertising medium - an advertising medium no one can criticize!"
- "Smokers who use our ashtray do not litter, an unexpected benefit."

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.oxyromandie.ch/showpdf.php?url=/\\_/tid/\\_pdf\\_files\\_/ssmb0103.pdf](https://www.oxyromandie.ch/showpdf.php?url=/_/tid/_pdf_files_/ssmb0103.pdf)

Pocket ashtrays were considered by the tobacco industry to have positive implications in terms of public relations and necessary to maintain smoking's social acceptance and to fight smoking restrictions in public places.



## ➤ Greenwashing and data collection

The marketing method called **greenwashing**, which seeks to reposition a polluting industry as more ecological, is well known and has been used by tobacco companies since the mid-1980s.

### **Their objective?**

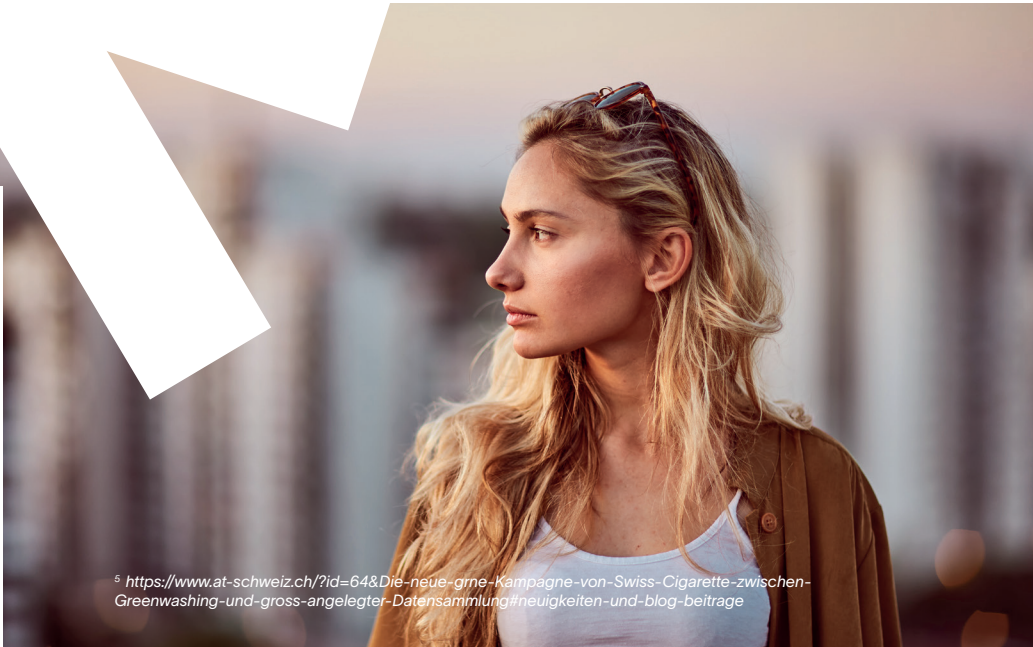
- Develop an image as a socially responsible industry and a model for environmental issues.
- Distract the public's attention from the environmental damage caused by the industry.
- Highlight the only area where the industry can shift its environmental responsibility onto the consumer: the consequence of cigarette butts.

On 27 May 2021, the Swiss Association for Tobacco Control (AT Suisse) responded to the Lara Green campaign, denouncing it as being “part greenwashing and part private data collection”<sup>5</sup>.

### **Questionable facts...**

- The Lara Green campaign was launched just before World No Tobacco Day: it is therefore a strategy seeking to counterbalance the anti-tobacco messaging of that day.
- The campaign focused on the cigarette butt when the entire production chain is responsible for environmental damage.
- Lara Green sought to create a positive image for the tobacco industry through cooperation with environmental associations, which are mentioned without being clearly named.
- The campaign also collected personal data as part of the distribution of pocket ashtrays, with the clear aim of better targeting tobacco products to consumers. This objective is never mentioned.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.at-schweiz.ch/?id=64&Die-neue-gme-Kampagne-von-Swiss-Cigarette-zwischen-Greenwashing-und-gross-angelegter-Datensammlung#neuigkeiten-und-blog-beitrage>



## ➤ Campaign strategy

### A | Duplicity

- Minimalist and unattractive campaign, set up to be **futile**.
- At the same time, a campaign conceived to provide evidence of tobacco companies' **awareness** and **commitment** in the fight against littering.
- The duplicity of this approach echoes the one used by Swiss Cigarette and the Swiss Loyalty Commission on the tobacco industry's voluntary advertising restrictions. These restrictions are intended for **political purposes**, as they are almost entirely **ineffective** at protecting the public, in particular young people, against tobacco publicity.



## **B** | The desire not to damage the image of the cigarette

The lack of cigarette butt images in Lara Green campaign visuals: indicative of the tobacco industry's efforts to comply with communications and messaging expectations around protecting the environment, but without harming the image of cigarettes.

## **C** | Simplification of facts

The environmental impact of tobacco products results from the entire production chain, from growing tobacco to the final consumption of the product. But according to Lara Green, the only problem is “the little cigarette butt”.

- Lara Green forgets to mention that pocket ashtrays have existed for thirty years and that tobacco companies distributed millions of them in the 1990s without any notable effect.
- BAT indicates on its website that despite its ecObox and PocketBox campaigns introduced in 2006, the cigarette butt pollution problem is growing, and yet this is supposedly due to “future regulation” and not the ineffectiveness of pocket ashtray distribution campaigns<sup>6</sup>.
- The individual responsibility of the smoker: the “easy solution” extolled by Lara Green depends solely on the smoker.

The appeal to smokers' individual responsibility has the double advantage for the tobacco industry of attributing to the smoker responsibility for the problem and its solution, exonerating the industry from any responsibility.

<sup>6</sup> [https://web.archive.org/web/20231210174330/https://www.bat.ch/group/sites/BAT\\_A4KKEC.nsf/vwPagesWebLive/DOA2THQB?opendocument#](https://web.archive.org/web/20231210174330/https://www.bat.ch/group/sites/BAT_A4KKEC.nsf/vwPagesWebLive/DOA2THQB?opendocument#)

## ➤ Similar campaigns in the past

### **British American Tobacco Switzerland (BAT) and Operation “Pocketbox”**

The “Lara Green” campaign is an extension of BAT’s 2006 campaign, first called “EcObox”, then “Pocketbox”.

- More than 1 Million pocket ashtrays distributed in Switzerland since April 2008.
- An invitation for all “Pocketbox” pocket ashtray users to support Summit Foundation, the environmental partner of the initiative.
- Some pocket ashtrays serve as advertising for the BAT cigarette brand Parisienne.

Here too, the intention behind this campaign is to outsource responsibility for dealing with litter waste such as cigarette butts. In a 2020 report<sup>7</sup>, BAT dedicates six pages (out of 147 pages), to the issue of waste, just one of which mentions cigarette butts, in which they write:

- “We are committed to working with consumers to enhance their understanding and ability to address the proper disposal of cigarette and tobacco waste.”
- “Research shows that consumer education and awareness-raising initiatives are likely to be some of the most effective measures.”

### **Japan Tobacco International (JTI) and Operation “Cleaning Up”**

JTI is cooperating with IGSU – a community of interests for a clean environment and the Swiss Competence Centre Against Littering - a community of interests for a clean world, to demonstrate that:

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.bat.com/content/dam/batcom/global/main-nav/investors-and-reporting/reporting/combined-annual-and-esg-report/sustainability-reporting/BAT\\_ESG\\_Report\\_2020.pdf](https://www.bat.com/content/dam/batcom/global/main-nav/investors-and-reporting/reporting/combined-annual-and-esg-report/sustainability-reporting/BAT_ESG_Report_2020.pdf)

- The industry shows commitment to cleaning up the environment.
- The problem is the careless disposal of cigarette butts by smokers, because according to a JTI representative interviewed by *Weltwoche*<sup>8</sup>, filters only take a few months or years to biodegrade.

This campaign was undoubtedly set up with the aim of demonstrating to politicians and ecologists that the industry is taking environmental action, while simultaneously outsourcing responsibility to smokers.

### **Philip Morris International (PMI) and Operation “Leave No Trace”**

In PMI’s “Leave No Trace” campaign, a limited edition of “Leave No Trace” Marlboro cigarette packs were rolled out, “which communicates anti-littering messages to adult smokers<sup>9</sup>.”

As with Lara Green, these three campaigns demonstrate that the tobacco industries’ message is that the environment must be cared for by individuals, and not by the government.



<sup>8</sup> <https://www.weltwoche.ch/ausgaben/2019-35/sonderheft-nachhaltigkeit/wir-spielen-auf-der-ganzen-klaviatur-die-weltwoche-ausgabe-35-2019.html>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.pmi.com/integratedreport2020>



## 04.Potential solutions?

Despite the greenwashing campaigns of some tobacco companies, **“These efforts make little difference in mitigating the impact of trillions of cigarette butts dumped each year into the global environment. Simply put, clean-ups will not work to alleviate tobacco product waste despoilment”**, explains Professor Thomas Novotny of the University of San Diego<sup>10</sup>.

### ➤ Raising awareness for greater responsibility

Increasing public awareness of tobacco manufacturers' role in the creation of waste could build political support for producer responsibility measures.

The Lara Green campaign and all other tobacco industry campaigns are nothing more than a strategy to deflect their responsibilities, by convincing smokers they alone are responsible for cigarette butt waste. In fact, it is the tobacco industry that bears this responsibility



<sup>10</sup> <https://tobaccocontrol.bmj.com/content/29/2/138>

for the entire production chain, from tobacco cultivation until its final consumption: "Responsibility for tobacco product waste prevention extends across the entire life cycle of product use and disposal", continues Professor Novotny, "but accountability has not yet been shifted upstream to the tobacco industry; it still remains with the epidemic's victims or as an externality for which communities and taxpayers pay."

## ➤ Political measures

"Strategies to increase awareness of tobacco companies' role in creating tobacco product waste could foster political support for producer responsibility measures that require the industry to manage tobacco product waste. Nevertheless, policy measures should continue to foster smoking cessation and decrease uptake, as reducing smoking prevalence presents the best long-term solution to addressing tobacco product waste", conclude the authors of an Article from *Tobacco Control*<sup>11</sup> in 2019.



<sup>11</sup> <http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/tobaccocontrol-2019-054956>

## Publishing details

This Briefing-paper is based on the report «Utilisation des cendriers de poche par l'industrie du tabac : opération d'externalisation des responsabilités, d'écoblanchiment, de préemption réglementaire et de marketing» written by Pascal Diethelm (OxySuisse).

It was developed and written by:

Médecine et Hygiène (project management, writing and editing):

Michael Balavoine, Marion Favier, Clémentine Fitaire,

Laetitia Grimaldi, Bertrand Kiefer, Sophie Lonchampt, Lucie Ménard,  
Joanna Szymanski, Mélissa Vuillet.

with the participation of OxySuisse:

Pascal Diethelm

Layout and illustrations: Adrien Bertchi

Photo credits: GettyImages, AdobeStock

© Médecine & Hygiène, 2022



# Transparency and Truth

Briefing-paper

## Pocket ashtrays: for better or worse?

Dossier #1 Greenwashing | June 2022

### Contact

OxySuisse  
Rue de la Fontaine 2  
1204 Genève  
tnt@oxysuisse.ch