The World Health Organization (WHO) has today called on policy-makers to treat cigarette filters, single use plastics, and consider banning cigarette filters to protect public health and the environment.

WHO reported that products like cigarettes, smokeless tobacco and e-cigarettes also add to the build-up of plastic pollution.

Cigarette filters contain microplastics and make up the second-highest form of plastic pollution worldwide.

Despite tobacco industry marketing, there is no evidence that filters have any proven health benefits.

WHO revealed the new information in a “Tobacco: Poisoning our planet” highlights that the industry’s carbon footprint from production, processing and transporting tobacco is equivalent to one-fifth of the CO2 produced by the commercial airline industry each year, further contributing to global warming.

The report went on to further reveal the  extent to which tobacco damages both the environment and human health, calling for steps to make the industry more accountable for the destruction it is causing.

Every year, the tobacco industry costs the world more than 8 million human lives, 600 million trees, 200,000 hectares of land, 22 billion tonnes of water and 84 million tonnes of CO2.

The plant is grown in low-and-middle-income countries, where water and farmland are often desperately needed to produce food for the region.

“Tobacco products are the most littered item on the planet, containing over 7,000 toxic chemicals, which leech into our environment when discarded. Roughly 4.5 trillion cigarette filters pollute our oceans, rivers, city sidewalks, parks, soil and beaches every year,” said Dr Ruediger Krech, Director of Health Promotion at WHO.

The costs of cleaning up littered tobacco products fall on taxpayers, rather than the industry creating the problem.

Each year, this costs China roughly USD 2.6 billion and India roughly USD 766 million. The cost for Brazil and Germany come in at over USD 200 million (see table below for further estimates).

Countries like France and Spain and cities like San Francisco, California in the USA have taken a stand. Following the Polluter Pays Principle, they have successfully implemented “extended producer responsibility legislation” which makes the tobacco industry responsible for clearing up the pollution it creates.

WHO urges countries and cities to follow this example, as well as give support to tobacco farmers to switch to sustainable crops, implement strong tobacco taxes (that could also include an environmental tax) and offer support services to help people quit tobacco.