

Proposed menthol ban in US would cut littering by 3.8 billion cigarette butts annually

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Discarded cigarette butts are a top source of plastic pollution, and a new study estimates that banning menthol cigarettes in the United States

would lead to 3.8 billion fewer littered cigarette filters each year, saving about 750 000 kg—or 1.7 million pounds—of waste each year.

Cigarette butts are the most-littered items in the world. Smokers litter about 4.5 trillion cigarettes each year globally. Although cigarette butts are small and may appear environmentally harmless, they are made of cellulose acetate, a plastic that is slow to break down. Littered [cigarette butts](#) leach nicotine, heavy metals, and other [toxic chemicals](#) into soil and water supplies. The World Health Organization (WHO) has warned that these chemicals pose a serious threat to wildlife and the environment.

Researchers at the International Tobacco Control (ITC) Policy Evaluation Project at the University of Waterloo in Canada previously reported that 1.3 million smokers in the U.S. would quit if the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) were to implement its recently proposed ban on menthol cigarettes. That projection is based on the demonstrated effect that Canada's menthol cigarette ban had on quitting.

In calculating the reduction in the amount of plastic waste, ITC researchers multiplied their previous projection of 1.3 million quitters by the average of 12 cigarettes smoked per day, from an earlier ITC study, and then multiplied by 365 to get the yearly total. In the U.S., two-thirds of cigarettes are littered. These calculations resulted in their estimate that there would be 3.8 billion fewer cigarettes littered per year after a menthol ban in the U.S.

"These calculations show that at the same time a menthol cigarette ban in the U.S. would have a tremendous impact in reducing smoking, it would also have an enormous impact on reducing the environmental toll of those cigarettes not smoked and littered. The findings further justify the FDA's proposed menthol ban," said Dr. Geoffrey T. Fong, professor of psychology and public health sciences at Waterloo, and the principal

investigator of the ITC Project.

WHO has long recognized that tobacco products damage the environment in addition to its devastating harms to smokers and non-smokers from [secondhand smoke](#). Indeed, its 2022 World No Tobacco Day called attention to the [environmental damage](#) from [tobacco products](#). WHO and environmental organizations are calling for bans on plastic [cigarette filters](#) to reduce single-use plastic waste.

On April 28, 2022, FDA released proposed rules to ban [menthol cigarettes](#) and flavored cigars. The agency is currently reviewing feedback submitted during the public comment period.

The estimates of reduced plastic waste littering after the proposed U.S. menthol cigarette ban were published in *Tobacco Control*.

More information: Lorraine V Craig et al, Calculating the potential environmental impact of a menthol cigarette ban in the USA, *Tobacco Control* (2022). [DOI: 10.1136/tc-2022-057563](https://doi.org/10.1136/tc-2022-057563)

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