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Environmental

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New Initiatives to improve disposal of plastic and other waste

The Cabinet last week approved a proposal by the Minister to Environment and Natural Resources, Rukman Senanayake, to introduce a series of initiatives to control pollution due to the improper disposal of plastic and other waste. A cess of between 1.0% and 1.5% is to be imposed on plastic raw materials at the point of import, and the entirety of the revenue generated, will be deposited in a special Plastics Account at the Central Environmental Authority.

The Ministry has also obtained approval to establish a Plastics Partnership Committee, made up of representatives of the Plastics and Rubber Manufacturing Institute, Central Environmental Authority and Ministry of Finance, authoritative sources said.

The cess will pay for an awareness campaign to urge the public to dispose of all waste thoughtfully, aiming to make Sri Lanka tidier and more environment-conscious. It will also fund environmental education, incentives for recycling projects and pilot projects implemented through local authorities, and the provision of grants to the plastics industry to assist in the production of

big-degradable and environmentally safe plastics. Incentives are also to be given to initiate pilot projects on garbage separation, and to assist recycling industries, the sources said.

The Ministry had a series of meetings with representatives of the plastics industry, and arrived at this solution through a consultative process. This is the first time in Sri Lanka that a cess has been introduced through a participatory process with the affected industry. Another novel aspect of the cess is that the plastics industry will, through the Plastics and Rubber Manufacturing Institute, have the final say in how the money is spent, ensuring that it is channelled entirely into the identified programmes.

The cess is expected to generate a revenue of every Rs. 100M per year. There has been growing demand by environmental advocacy groups to altogether ban the manufacture and sale of "lunch sheets" and "sili-sili" bags of thickness less than 12 microns, as has been done in Bangladesh for all plastic bags. These products have already been prohibited in the Adam's Peak pilgrim route, all national parks, the National Zoo and the Trincomalee Naval Headworks. The Ministry will consid-

er other initiatives in the future, the sources said.

The present step has been taken on the basis that plastics are an essential part of industrial growth, and that the environmental problems stem from poor behaviours in the disposal of litter and garbage generally, and not from plastics alone. The awareness programme being launched through the fund is expected to focus largely on urging the public to dispose of all waste — including plastics — thoughtfully, through a "Keep Sri Lanka Clean" focusing also on appropriate awareness for schoolchildren.

Cabinet also approved a total administrative ban on "sili sili" bags and lunch sheets, in all government buildings, offices and premises including national parks, cultural and archaeological sites, schools and playgrounds. All political parties too, are being urged not to use plastic decorations in public places.

While plastic litter causes serious aesthetic problems, the extremely slow degradation of plastic litter can have serious environmental consequences. A clean environment is recognized as being important also to the growth of the tourism industry.