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## **1 Background**

The principle of sustainable development, which implies that the promotion of economic and social development must occur in conjunction with the protection of the environment for present and future generations, has been embraced by the South African Government and embodied in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, as well as the National Environment Act. There is therefore increasing attention being given to issues that have an impact on the environment.

The Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism (DEAT) has identified littering in general as a problem facing the South African environment, and has focused on the effect of indiscriminate dumping of thin plastic bags, believing that this has contributed greatly to the problem. It is in this light that the DEAT has proposed new plastic bag regulations under Section 24 of the Environmental Conservation Act (73/1998), which were published in the Government Gazette of 19 May 2000 No 21203, GN 1994 of 2000. The text of the regulations and the accompanying explanatory memorandum is contained in Annexure A of this report.

The South African Government indicated that the need for the regulations is a logical extension of South Africa's integrated pollution control and waste management policy and strategy, which provides a systematic framework to guide the implementation of a range of actions, one of which is the combating of littering. Initiatives are already in place for other major categories of litter and that plastic bags are logically the next category to address.

From the public comments received in response to the DEAT's invitation for comment on the proposed regulations, the exploration of various possibilities has been suggested. There were numerous proposals for educational programmes, and increased anti-littering campaigns, as well as for the introduction of heavy anti-littering fines. Increased recycling of plastics has been identified as an opportunity, provided that the material has a value and that a market is established for the recycled products. The issue however, is that none of these have been quantified. It is to this extent that all constituencies of Nedlac's Trade and Industry Chamber agreed that joint research should be urgently conducted in order to develop a shared understanding of the potential socio-economic impact of these proposed regulations.

For the purposes of this research, data collection was restricted to vest-type carrier bags. The reason for the focus on these thin, plastic bags with handles, such as those distributed in retail outlets, is the volume of production and usage relative to other forms of disposable consumer plastic. This was decided in order to define the scope of the study more accurately and facilitate sampling for the study.

This report presents the findings and conclusions of the research into the socio-economic impact of the proposed regulations. The research was conducted in accordance with the Study Terms of Reference, which is contained in Annexure B. No recommendations are made. The purpose of this report is to guide the thinking of the Plastic Bag Task Team in formulating recommendations to NEDLAC.