



Proposed Priorities for the New President to Reduce Plastic Pollution

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Background: The Urgency of Reducing Plastic Pollution

Global plastic production has increased sevenfold since 1980. It was 460 million tons each year in 2019 and is projected to almost double to 766 million tons each year by 2040. For context: The average American [currently generates](#) roughly 200 pounds of plastic waste each year, and this will only grow. These [rising levels of production](#) are damaging human and environmental health and accelerating climate change.

An estimated [15 million metric tons](#) of plastic waste end up in the ocean annually, harming fish, turtles, whales, dolphins, seabirds, and other marine life. The ocean is being turned into a plastics landfill. Weather, wave action, and sunlight break marine plastic waste into smaller and smaller pieces. Microplastics have been found in [every environment](#) where scientists have looked: from the tallest mountaintops to the deepest ocean trenches, from the tropics to the tundra, from clouds to rainwater, from lakes and rivers to soil — and in the air we breathe. They've been found in many [foods and drinks](#), including seafood, meat, milk, vegetables, fruits, beer, salt, and bottled water.

More than 16,000 chemicals [are used](#) in manufacturing plastics, and at least 4,200 of these have been identified as hazardous to human health and the environment. Thousands more have never been tested. Many of these chemicals migrate out of plastic packaging into our foods, drinks, household products, and bodies. Microplastics, with the chemicals they contain, have been found in [nearly every human organ system](#), including the [lungs](#), [brain](#), [blood](#), [testicles](#), [placenta](#), and [breast milk](#). A [2024 study](#) found tiny plastic particles in carotid arteries; and patients with plastic in their arteries were nearly five times more likely to suffer from a heart attack or stroke. Other medical conditions attributable to endocrine-disrupting and carcinogenic chemicals in plastics include cancers, diabetes, obesity, developmental disorders, and infertility.

Plastics and petrochemicals are also [harming the health](#) of industry workers and communities near facilities for fossil fuel extraction and plastics manufacturing. People of color and those living below the poverty line are [more likely to live](#) within 2 miles of multiple facilities, and are sickened by cancer and other pollution-related diseases at disproportionately high rates.

Because fossil fuels are the main feedstock for 99% of plastics, plastics have greenhouse gas and [climate impacts](#) similar to other fossil-fuel based industries. Beyond Plastics' 2021 report "[The New Coal: Plastics and Climate Change](#)" found "the U.S. plastics industry is responsible for at least 232 million tons of CO₂e gas emissions per year. This is equivalent to the average emissions from 116 average-sized (500 megawatt) coal-fired power plants in 2020." The plastics industry is set to release more greenhouse gases [than coal plants](#) in the U.S. by 2030, including

millions of tons of methane. In fact, if the plastics industry were a country, it would be at least the fifth largest emitter of greenhouse gases — after China, the United States, India, and Russia.

Plastic is an energy-intensive material that harms people and the environment [all along its supply chain](#): fracking and drilling, transporting, refining, producing virgin resin, processing, and manufacturing into finished goods. The disposal of plastics via incineration or landfilling is just as, if not more, harmful than its production. As the fossil fuel industry pivots from a domestic decline in demand for its traditional products, it is massively increasing the use of fossil fuels for plastics and plastic chemicals. The negative impacts will only grow as the petrochemical and plastics industries continue to expand existing facilities, build new ones, and ramp up production. The United Nations Environmental Program projects that global plastic production will [double by 2040](#) unless comprehensive measures are taken.

The most effective way to address the harms from plastic is to reduce plastic production. Pew's "[Breaking the Plastic Wave](#)" report estimated that 47% of the world's projected 2040 demand for plastics could be met instead with plastic reduction and substitution with other materials. Additionally, the Council on Environmental Quality's [2024 report](#) recommended taking a "comprehensive approach that addresses the impacts of plastics throughout the entire life cycle — from production to end of life" — and said the responsibility for doing so "requires coordinated action from all levels of government."

The U.S. currently [produces more plastic waste](#) than any other country. With the Pew and Council on Environmental Quality reports in mind, Beyond Plastics recommends that the next U.S. president reduce the production of plastics by 50% over the next 10 years through the following actions:

Executive Agencies

1. **The new administration** should issue a moratorium on new permits or renewing permits for petroleum refining, petrochemical plants, and other facilities that produce plastics and their precursors.
2. **The Environmental Protection Agency** should be directed to conduct continuous monitoring, testing, and remediation of air, groundwater, drinking water, and soil, with costs to be reimbursed by the polluters at existing plastic production facilities.
3. **The new administration** should bring enforcement actions against companies for permit violations, including overruling state agencies when necessary.
4. **The new administration** should declare a national moratorium on the construction of chemical recycling facilities. Chemical recycling facilities (also called "advanced recycling") purport to convert plastic waste using high heat, chemicals, and pressure into fuel or new plastics. These facilities generate hazardous wastes, toxic air pollutants, and greenhouse gases, and they are primarily sited in environmental justice communities. These technologies also do not operate economically at scale well; two of these 11 constructed chemical recycling facilities in the United States closed in 2024. Chemical recycling is not a solution to plastic pollution; it distracts the public and policymakers from

implementing actual solutions, such as the reduction of single-use plastics, building a reuse and refill infrastructure, and placing limits on the production of plastic.

5. **The new administration** should ban the export of plastic waste to other countries. In 2023, the U.S. [shipped about](#) 900 million pounds of plastic trash to other countries. About a third of waste exports are sent to developing countries that lack the infrastructure and markets to manage this influx of plastics. As a result, America's exported plastic trash is often burned out in the open or discarded in waterways, damaging the health of local communities and ecosystems and adding to climate impacts.
6. **The Department of State** should be directed to join the [High Ambition Coalition to End Plastic Pollution](#) as part of the United Nations' global plastics treaty negotiations. Rather than allowing plastic waste to almost double by 2040 under a business-as-usual scenario, this coalition of [66 states and countries](#) is working to adopt an international, legally binding agreement to *end* plastic pollution by 2040. On [August 14, 2024, Reuters reported](#) that the U.S. was now willing to support a global target for reducing the amount of new plastic produced and develop a list of "chemicals of concern." However, more details are needed. The State Department should establish significant reduction goals for the United States and phase out the most toxic chemicals used in plastics.
7. **The Environmental Protection Agency** should be directed to [ban vinyl chloride](#), the known carcinogen used to make polyvinyl chloride (PVC) plastic and vinyl. A recent [report by Material Research L3C](#) found that 966 vinyl chloride "incidents" (leaks, spills, fires, and explosions) occurred between 2010 and 2023 — an average of one every 5.3 days. One of these was the disastrous Norfolk Southern train derailment in East Palestine, Ohio, in February 2023. The EPA can act through the prioritization, risk evaluation, and risk management processes under the Toxic Substances Control Act. On July 24, 2024, the [EPA proposed](#) that vinyl chloride and four other chemicals be designated as high-priority substances.
8. **The Department of Justice** should be directed to open an investigation into the plastics industry's false and misleading claims about recyclability and recycled content of plastics.
9. **The Department of Justice** should be directed to open an investigation into the plastics industry's health impacts on people living near where plastic and its precursor chemicals are extracted, transported, processed, and manufactured.
10. **The Department of Justice** should be directed to open an investigation into the plastics industry's pollution of waterways, including streams, rivers, lakes, bays, and the ocean.
11. **The Department of Justice** should be directed to open an investigation into the plastics industry's role in the pollution of public lands, which has resulted in costly cleanups.
12. **The Department of Energy and the National Renewable Energy Laboratory** should be directed not to fund or support any chemical recycling projects or projects that burn plastics. Chemical recycling produces hazardous wastes, toxic air emissions, and

greenhouse gases, and chemical recycling facilities have been disproportionately sited in environmental justice communities. The majority of plastic waste processed at U.S. chemical recycling facilities [has been burned](#) for fuel rather than used as a feedstock to displace fossil fuels in the production of new plastic resin.¹

13. **The Department of Energy** [should not issue](#) a federal loan guarantee for the proposed [IRG plant in Erie, Pennsylvania](#); it would supply 20,000 tons of processed plastic waste to be used in steel production at steel plants in Indiana. This is not a good use of Inflation Reduction Act funding.
14. **The U.S. Department of Labor** should be directed to work on a “just transition” for plastic production workers. As nations collectively work to reduce plastic production globally through the negotiations on an international plastics treaty, some plastics industry workers may face job loss. The Department of Labor should support displaced workers with job training and job placement for new jobs, and ensure support for affected communities.
15. **The General Services Administration** should be directed to amend federal procurement policies to reduce waste and increase reuse, setting an example for state and local governments. The GSA should prohibit the federal government from purchasing single-use plastics except during emergencies. It should also prohibit the sale of single-use plastics in national parks. Federal offices should make water fountains and/or drinking water filling stations widely available. Cafeterias and food services in all federally funded buildings and institutions should be required to replace disposable and single-use dishware, utensils, and food and beverage containers with non-plastic products that are reusable or refillable. Congress should also provide funding for these replacements and any necessary infrastructure, including dishwashing equipment and water fountains in schools, hospitals, and public places.
16. **The National Institute of Health** should be directed to rapidly fund scientific studies on the human health impacts of microplastics and nanoplastics, including microfibers. While numerous scientific studies have already found microplastics in human organs and other parts of the human body, more research is needed to fully understand the health consequences.
17. **The Federal Trade Commission** should be directed to prohibit deceptive advertising by bringing enforcement actions against companies that misrepresent the recyclability, compostability, or other environmental attributes of plastics and so-called “bioplastics” and “compostable” plastics. State attorneys general from New York, Minnesota, and Connecticut — as well as nonprofit organizations — have brought several false-advertising lawsuits. California’s attorney general is investigating the plastics industry and issued a [subpoena to two plastics industry trade organizations](#) — the

¹ Due to very low tolerances for contaminant chemicals at ethane crackers, no more than 2% of cracker inputs may be sourced from pyrolysis oils or other fuels produced through chemical recycling; the remaining 98% of the “blend” must be [from virgin sources](#) (fracked or drilled gas). This means chemical recycling does not displace virgin fossil fuels in any significant way.

American Chemistry Council and the Plastics Industry Association — for documents that may reveal the industry’s deception of the public about the recyclability of plastics. The New York attorney general has sued PepsiCo over its alleged plastic products polluting the Buffalo River. In July 2024, the [Plastic Pollution Coalition filed suit against Danone Waters](#) for untruthfully claiming its water was healthy and sustainable, despite the microplastics and bisphenol A (BPA) in its plastic bottles. In 2021, [Earth Island Institute filed a suit against Coca-Cola](#) for similar reasons. The FTC can get information about future enforcement actions by reading the report “[The Fraud of Plastic Recycling: How Big Oil and the Plastics Industry Deceived the Public for Decades and Caused the Plastic Waste Crisis.](#)”

18. **The Federal Trade Commission** should be directed to update and strengthen the Green Guides. In comments submitted by Just Zero, Beyond Plastics, and other organizations on April 24, 2024,² the FTC was urged to initiate a formal rulemaking process to codify the Green Guides, as well as the requirements of California’s Truth in Labeling Law, into binding federal regulation rather than a set of advisory guidelines. Many industry-funded advertising efforts have misled consumers into thinking that many items, such as plastic bags or drink cups, are recyclable when in fact they are not.
19. **The Federal Trade Commission** should be directed to prohibit companies from marketing products and packaging as recyclable through store drop-off programs unless the company can demonstrate that the program is proven to recycle at least 75% of the covered materials.
20. **The Federal Trade Commission** should be directed to strengthen the Green Guides’ recyclability provisions so that only products and packaging that are collected, sorted, and processed into new materials in accordance with objective criteria may be labeled as recyclable.

The new president should work with Congress to pass legislation to:

21. **Enact a strong national packaging reduction bill that** would transfer the cost of collecting, recycling, and disposing of plastic from taxpayers to the producers of packaged products. Commonly called extended producer responsibility ([EPR](#)), packaging reduction laws require producers to reimburse local governments and private waste haulers for the costs of collecting, sorting, and processing packaging waste for recycling or disposal. A strong national EPR bill would also:
 - a. **Require packaging to be gradually reduced by 50%** over 10 years;
 - b. **Prohibit the most toxic chemicals** — including PFAS, vinyl chloride, and heavy metals — from being used in packaging;
 - c. **Fund the development of reuse and refill** infrastructure; and
 - d. **Prohibit “chemical recycling”** from counting as recycling.

² Green Guides Review, Matter No. P954501, Docket FTC-2022-0077

22. **Enact a national bottle bill.** More than [140 billion](#) metal, glass, and plastic beverage containers were landfilled, burned, or littered in the U.S. in 2021, costing the economy [\\$5.1 billion](#) in lost revenue. Cans and bottles with a mandatory deposit on them are recycled at [two to three times](#) the rates of containers without deposits. A federal deposit-return law, or “bottle bill,” would dramatically increase national recycling rates ([from 24% to 82% for PET plastic alone](#)), reduce litter, conserve natural materials, cut down on greenhouse gas emissions, and create local jobs. The legislation should require that at least 25% of beverage containers be refillable by 2030.
23. **Enact the Break Free From Plastic Pollution Act** [[S3127 \(Merkley\)](#), [HR 6053 \(Huffman\)](#)], which would provide sweeping policy changes to reduce the production, use, and disposal of plastics.
24. **Enact the Fighting Fibers Act to reduce microplastic pollution from laundry** and to encourage research on the subject. Sponsored by Senator Jeff Merkley, the [Fighting Fibers Act](#) would require new washing machines to contain filters that trap microplastic fibers from synthetic fabrics, such as polyester and nylon.
25. **Enact the Plastic Pellet Free Waters Act.** Co-sponsored by Senator Dick Durbin ([S2337](#)) and Representative Mike Levin ([HR7634](#)), the Plastic Pellet Free Waters Act would require the EPA to promulgate new regulations that prohibit the release of pre-production plastic pellets and other plastics into waterways.
26. **Enact the Farewell to Foam Act.** Co-sponsored by Senator Chris Van Hollen ([S3440](#)) and Representative Lloyd Doggett ([HR6654](#)), the [Farewell to Foam Act](#) would phase out plastic foam (expanded polystyrene) food containers, loose fill foam (such as packing “peanuts”), and disposable foam picnic coolers. Eleven states and many municipalities have already banned these foam products. Many of these products contain the carcinogen styrene and pose threats to people and wildlife.
27. **Encourage reuse through new federal grants.** Enable local and regional governments, states, private businesses, and nonprofits to apply for federal funding to develop waste reduction, reuse and refill programs, and infrastructure. For example:
 - a. **Wineries or breweries** could receive grants to install commercial bottle-washing equipment to clean and sterilize bottles to be reused; and
 - b. **Schools and hospitals** could receive funding to purchase non-plastic reusable foodware and commercial dishwashers for school cafeterias.

In sum, the next president of the United States should use a combination of approaches to significantly reduce the production, use, transport, and disposal of plastics for the sake of public health and the environment. These include directives issued to federal agencies and efforts to work with Congress to introduce and pass relevant federal legislation.