

Break Free From Plastic Pollution Act of 2020 Background Summary

In February, 2020, Senator Tom Udall (D-NM) and Representative Alan Lowenthal (D-CA) will introduce the first comprehensive bill in Congress to address the plastic pollution crisis.

After several months of stakeholder input from over 200 individuals, environmental groups, businesses, trade associations, aquariums, academics, and state and local governments, Sen. Udall and Rep. Lowenthal will unveil the **Break Free From Plastic Pollution Act**.

The **Break Free From Plastic Pollution Act** will reduce the amount of unnecessary and wasteful plastic that is created and reform the broken waste and recycling collection system that has led to this catastrophe.

Annual global production of plastic has reached 335 million tons and continues to rise. Global plastic production is projected to more than triple by 2050, accounting for 20 percent of all global oil consumption. Mass production of plastics, which began just six decades ago, has accelerated so rapidly that it has created 8.3 billion metric tons—most of it in disposable products that end up as trash. Of the 8.3 billion metric tons that have been produced, 6.3 billion metric tons have become plastic waste.

The United States alone disposes or incinerates 32 million tons of plastic each year. Every year, about 8 million tons of plastic waste escapes into the oceans from coastal nations. That's the equivalent of setting five garbage bags full of trash on every foot of coastline around the world. In addition to ocean pollution, plastic is being found in every corner of the world, including miles above us in Rocky Mountain National Park where U.S. Geological Survey scientists found plastic particles and fibers in rainwater.

While plastic is an important contributor for a variety of products like medical devices, lighter cars and other advanced products, plastic producers have steadily increased production of needless products that have flooded the market. These products have overwhelmed waste handling systems as many of them are not recyclable and there is no end-market for those products that can be recycled. Producers are not required to incorporate recycled content into their products and the cost of virgin plastic from cheap natural gas is far lower.

Rather than reducing the waste they create or taking responsibility for its management, producers have shifted the responsibility for managing waste to government entities whose budgets are stretched thin. Meanwhile, industry has promoted strategies to remove plastic pollution from the environment and put more emphasis on their view that it is the government's "responsibility" to invest in recycling infrastructure and accept plastic items in recycling bins that will never be recycled. All at the expense of U.S. taxpayers.

We cannot recycle our way out of this crisis or rely solely on the government to clean it all up. According to data from the United States Environmental Protection Agency, the US Census Bureau Trade Data and plastic industry recycling reports, the national recycling rate for plastic waste in the United States is projected to sink from 8.4 percent in 2017 to about 5 percent in 2019. Consumers have been led to believe that everything they put in their blue bin will be magically turned into a new product somewhere because items are labeled recyclable.

The truth is that the recycling in our blue bins is often landfilled, incinerated, or shipped overseas to countries that are unable to manage this waste. Before 2017, the United States was sending 4,000 shipping containers a day full of American waste to China every year. China has implemented the Green Fence, National Sword, and Blue Sky policies, severely restricting the amount of contaminated and

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poorly sorted plastics it would accept. This shift in China's policy has resulted in the loss of markets for low-value plastic packaging that was previously considered recyclable. That material is now being landfilled, burned, or shipped to other countries who cannot manage the influx of this waste and see much of it burned or lost to the ocean.

Meanwhile, the plastics and oil & gas industries are investing in unprecedented expansion. \$164 billion in investments for 264 new facilities or expansion projects in the US alone have been announced, many relying on state and local tax incentives. In as little as five years, these investments could increase global plastics production capacity by a third, driving companies to produce ever greater volumes of plastics for years to come. As a result, this wave of investment will increase pollution risks to frontline communities throughout the plastics supply chain, directly undermine efforts by cities, countries, and the global community to combat the growing plastics crisis, and will exacerbate the growing climate crisis.

In 2019 alone, the production and incineration of plastic will add more than 850 million metric tons of greenhouse gases to the atmosphere—equal to the pollution from 189 new 500-megawatt coal-fired power plants. If plastic production and use grow as currently planned, by 2030, these emissions could reach 1.34 gigatons per year – equivalent to the emissions released by more than 295 new 500-megawatt coal-fired power plants.

All of this is placing a tremendous strain on our environment and budgets. Wildlife and sea creatures are suffering and dying from ingesting plastic products or getting entangled in them. Evidence now shows that plastic, which does not biodegrade, is breaking down into microplastics that are contaminating our food, water and air. A growing body of research is finding plastic and associated toxins throughout the food web, including in our blood, feces, and tissues. Exposure to these toxins has been linked to cancers, birth defects, impaired immunity, endocrine disruption, and other ailments. With local governments spending millions of dollars to manage plastic waste and prevent it from entering our rivers, streams, oceans and landscapes, citizens are being hit by the impacts of plastic pollution from all ends.

The time has come to truly address this massive crisis. Across the world, countries are working together to reduce the amount of plastic that is produced and ensure more efficient handling of the waste. Here in the United States, state and local governments are implementing policies to reduce unnecessary plastic products and shift responsibility to producers for managing the waste that results. Many businesses are looking to lead the way with investments in reusable packaging and increasing the recycled content of their products. They all need federal leadership to steer the country in the right direction.

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