

Sounding the Alarm on Plastics and Climate Change

Former Congressman Richard Ottinger and former EPA Regional Administrator Judith Enck warn that we cannot prevent catastrophic climate change without turning off the plastic tap

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There's been quite a lot of media attention paid to the fact that plastic waste is rapidly turning our oceans into landfills. Ocean plastic has also been the focus of the vast majority of legislation and other actions to address the problem thus far.

Although plastic pollution does pose a major and growing danger to marine wildlife, ecosystems, fisheries, and human health, plastic is, unfortunately, not just a threat to our oceans. Plastic is also a major threat to our climate and our collective future. The role of plastic production as a major climate threat is overlooked in most climate change programs, including the important new Biden climate agenda.

The rarely discussed reality is that plastic is a significant climate threat. In fact, if plastics were a country, it would be the world's fifth largest greenhouse gas emitter, beating out all but China, the U.S., India and Russia. <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41558-019-0459-z>

In the United States, plastic is made from a combination of chemicals and ethane, which is a byproduct of hydrofracked natural gas. Plastics release greenhouse gases at every stage of their life, from extraction to refinement to production to transport to usage to disposal and beyond. In fact, scientists are now questioning whether microplastic pollution may interfere with our oceans ability to act as a crucial carbon sink. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0025326X19308689>

Worse yet, the plastic industry plans to TRIPLE plastic production by 2050 and have announced major new plastic-related production facilities in Louisiana, Texas, North Dakota, Pennsylvania and Ohio. By 2050, the accumulation of plastic's greenhouse gas emissions could reach over 56 gigatons – 10-13 percent of the entire remaining carbon budget. <https://www.ciel.org/plasticandclimate>. If we allow this planned expansion to occur, it could undermine our ability to remain within the 1.5 degree C global temperature rise scientists agree is necessary to avoid the worst ravages of climate change. In short, if the plastics industry succeeds with its planned buildout, it's likely game over for climate.

Fortunately, there are solutions to this looming crisis. But in order to be effective, we must begin by turning off the plastic tap. We must make the changes needed to ensure that our society makes, uses, and disposes of less, rather than more, plastic. The Break Free From Plastic Pollution Act (Senate bill 984 and House bill 2238) introduced by Senator Jeff Merkley (OR) and Representative Alan Lowenthal (CA) does just that. We call on the Congress to pass it without delay.

This will be a major fight as the oil and gas companies are banking on the increase in plastic to make up for falling demand for fossil fuels as alternative energy becomes more widely available, affordable, and sought after and as electric cars and trucks become the norm rather than the exception. Simply put, plastic is Big Oil's Plan B, a fact the industry openly acknowledges. <https://www.dw.com/en/plastic-oil-petrochemicals-coronavirus/a-52834661> It is clear that the petrochemical industry needs to come up with a Plan C that will not hasten climate catastrophe.

The Biden Administration has made slowing climate change one of its top priorities, as it should be. Now we need it and our elected officials to see the big picture and act accordingly. Swift action to limit plastic production (and the industry's planned expansion) and to phase out single-use plastics must be a mandatory part of the Biden Administration's climate change agenda.

- Richard Ottinger is a former member of Congress who served as chairman of the Energy Conservation and Power Subcommittee, Energy & Commerce Committee and the founder of the Pace University's Energy and Climate Center.
- Judith Enck is a former EPA Regional Administrator and the President of Beyond Plastics, a national project based at Bennington College where she is a visiting professor and senior fellow in the Center for the Advancement of Public Action (CAPA).