

Global plastics treaty



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plastic



Issues and concerns

Plastic pollution is ubiquitous. It is in our food, our water, the air we breathe, the deepest ocean trenches, and the most remote mountains. It is harmful to human health and ecosystems, and it serves as a carrier for even more potent toxicants that cause cancer and other serious illnesses. Plastic also has an enormous climate impact – [if it were a country, plastic would be the fifth-largest greenhouse gas emitter on Earth.](#)

Addressing these problems requires an international framework because plastic pollution does not respect borders. Oil and fossil gas (plastic's feedstock materials), plastic polymers and additives, plastic products and packaging, and plastic waste are all widely traded internationally. In particular, limitations on plastic production require international cooperation to prevent production shifting from one country to another. Currently, plastic is largely unregulated under international law; [only a few aspects are patchily addressed by treaties such as the Basel, Stockholm, and London Conventions.](#) A new legal instrument, covering the entire lifecycle of plastic, is required to tackle this planetary crisis.

A plastics treaty should focus on three core goals:

- 1. Reducing the total quantity of plastic produced.** [Plastic production is doubling every 15-20 years and with it, the volume of plastic waste generated.](#) The oil and gas industry [sees plastic as its primary growth market](#) and is investing billions of dollars in new and expanded facilities. Through National Action Plans, countries would choose their own policy instruments (e.g., bans on single-use plastics, a plastic tax, quantitative caps) to scale back production to meet globally agreed upon goals. The reduction in plastic will [open economic opportunities](#) for local businesses based on alternative service models, including material reuse, bulk stores, and compostable packaging.
- 2. Improving circularity in plastic.** Very little plastic is currently recycled; plastic's most notable quality – its durability – has become a primary drawback as it is treated as a disposable material. Improving circularity means eliminating toxic additives and fillers and avoiding some polymers, such as PVC, entirely. It also requires clear definitions (e.g., compostable, biodegradable, and bio-based) and labels to facilitate effective recycling. Harmonized standards and data collection would be the responsibility of an international body, while national policies could restrict plastic production to types that are readily and economically recyclable or reusable.
- 3. Eliminating plastic pollution in the environment.** Even with reduced levels of plastic production, improved waste management will be needed to ensure that end-of-life plastics are recovered and dealt with in an environmentally-safe manner. This is best accomplished through an integrated [zero-waste system.](#)* Many jurisdictions struggle with the high cost of waste management; it is important that the financial costs of managing plastic accrue to plastic manufacturers rather than to the public.

A new plastics treaty would establish measurable goals while allowing countries flexibility in their approaches to reach those goals. Comprehensive monitoring will allow progress toward the global goals to be transparently reported and measured. Financial and technical assistance will be needed to support both implementation and reporting.

Recommendations

Several elements are critical to ensuring the success of a new plastics treaty. First, **it must cover the full lifecycle of plastic**, from precursors (oil and fossil gas), through production and use to disposal. Many of plastic's worst impacts, such as greenhouse gas emissions and toxic air emissions, [occur primarily in the production phase](#). Other problems, such as the transfer of toxic compounds into food, happen in the use-phase, while non-recyclability of most plastics is an end-of-life issue. Similarly, the treaty should have an **open mandate** to address any issues relevant to plastic. This will allow it to consider new concerns and devise new solutions as the science develops.

The treaty **must be legally binding** to ensure compliance and stimulate national policy. It must be well-supported through clear and transparent reporting, as well as financial and technical assistance.

Pitfalls to avoid

The treaty's scope should not be limited to plastic waste or marine plastics, as this would preclude addressing some of the most important problems. It would also rule out the most effective interventions to limit the quantity and types of plastics produced. [As United Nations Environment Programme \(UNEP\) has noted, the current international legal framework on plastic is patchwork and a full-lifecycle treaty, not another patch, is required.](#)

Neither the treaty nor national action plans should rely on voluntary or corporate-led programs, such as voluntary Extended Producer Responsibility, Plastic Pacts, or offsetting schemes. These are greenwashing efforts whose primary purpose is to prevent effective regulation while doing little to address the real problems.

Finally, the treaty must be grounded in current technical realities; it should not leave problems to be dealt with by technologies such as chemical recycling that are immature or do not yet exist. Clearly, the treaty must not promote polluting technologies and practices such as incineration and co-processing of plastic waste in cement kilns which would create other environmental and climate hazards.

* **Zero waste** is a comprehensive waste management approach that prioritizes waste reduction and material recovery. Strategies include policy interventions and business approaches to drive the redesign of products and delivery systems; and increasing access to reuse, repair, recycling, and composting. The ultimate aim is to create a circular economy, shrinking waste disposal to zero. Disposal-based systems rely on incineration ("waste to energy") and landfills to handle the majority of the waste stream, resulting in higher economic costs and severe environmental consequences.

Further reading

- "Call to Action: Global Plastics Treaty." 2021. <https://plasticstreaty.org>
- "Convention on Plastic Pollution Toward a new global agreement to address plastic pollution." 2021. Center for International Environmental Law, Environmental Investigation Agency, Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives. <https://www.ciel.org/reports/convention-on-plastic-pollution-toward-a-new-global-agreement-to-address-plastic-pollution>
- "Plastic Is Carbon." 2021. Center for International Environmental Law, Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives, Plastic Solutions Fund. <https://www.no-burn.org/plasticiscarbon>



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