



Global Agreement Can Stimulate Circular Economy for Plastics

Plastic Makers Call for U.N. Action on Plastics in Environment - But Production Caps Would Be Step Backward

We have a prime opportunity to build a circular economy for plastics... globally. And help stop the flow of plastics into our environment.

In March, the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) plans to launch negotiations on an international agreement to prevent leakage of plastics into our environment. America's plastic makers believe this is the best opportunity to create a world in which plastics are reused in a circular economy instead of discarded.

And we need to get it right. So we've outlined 5 Principles (see below) for an international agreement among nations that would retain the societal benefits of plastics while marshalling the resources needed to keep plastics out of our environment. The principles acknowledge the role of plastics in achieving U.N. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) along with the need to achieve universal access to waste collection and recycling around the globe.

As governments negotiate solutions, it's important to focus on keeping plastics out of the environment, not our economies, as some are proposing (more below).

We can meet this challenge and create value instead of waste. Done right, this agreement could help deliver cleaner, more equitable communities globally.

Plastics Contribute to SDGs



Plastics are lightweight and efficient materials that allow us to do more with less material, which contributes to sustainability and helps drive down greenhouse gas emissions.

Plastics contribute directly to multiple SDGs, most notably on climate action, affordable/clean energy, and water/sanitation. For example:



Carmakers use durable, lightweight plastics to decrease the weight of car parts, which reduces fuel use and greenhouse gas emissions. Lightweight plastics also are critical to increasing the performance and sustainability of lower-carbon electric vehicles.



To expand lower-carbon energy sources, we need an increased supply of strong yet lightweight wind turbine blades, made mostly from various plastic composites, such as glass/carbon fiber-reinforced plastics. Solar panels also rely on a wide variety of plastic parts to deliver power cost effectively: electrical insulators, pipes, valves, fittings, films/sheets that help protect silicon panels and more.



Plastic pipes typically are more economical to install and maintain and often can retrofit crumbling and rusting pipes without digging massive trenches. They also save substantial energy by significantly reducing drag of moving water through old fashioned pipes.

As nations deliberate over a global agreement to address plastic waste, it's critical to recognize the role and contributions of plastics to SDGs. Frankly, the global community cannot realistically meet its climate change commitments without the help of plastics.



PLASTICS HELP IMPROVE HYGIENE, NUTRITION, AND LIVING STANDARDS AROUND THE WORLD.

In many parts of the developing world, rapidly growing economies are raising people out of poverty and into the middle class. Like developed nations, these growing populations increasingly rely on plastics to create access to better medical and personal care, safer food and water, energy efficient homes and automobiles, electronics, and a broad array of consumer goods to live a better life.

Production Caps

Making a Tough Situation Worse

In the lead up to the UNEA meeting, some groups have suggested that placing limits on the manufacturing of plastic would help stem the flow of plastics into the environment. Production caps risk taking a step backward for the environment, hampering the fight against climate change and having no discernable effect on increasing plastics recycling while causing massive disruptions in global supply chains.



Production caps would reverse many sustainability advancements. Replacing plastics with other materials in multiple applications – cars, insulation, packaging, low carbon energy – would increase greenhouse gas emissions and our environmental footprint. Studies typically find that four times more alternative material is needed (by weight) to perform the same function as plastics in consumer products and packaging. To protect the environment, we should use the most efficient materials for the job.



Limiting manufacturing of materials does not contribute to universal access to waste management and recycling. We should not focus on restricting essential and life-saving materials that contribute to sustainability. We should focus on ending the leakage of those materials into the environment.



We are all still reeling from severely disrupted global supply chains caused by the ongoing pandemic. Would we seriously consider artificially disrupting supply chains through production caps on the materials that enable nearly every sector of the global economy, including medical, food production, water delivery, electric vehicles, home building, low carbon energy, and more? Limiting plastics production would cause devastating ripple effects throughout the global economy and risk untenable inflation.

PRODUCTION CAPS ON PLASTICS IS A BAD IDEA THAT WOULD MAKE A TOUGH SITUATION WORSE. IT'S TIME TO FOCUS ON SOLVING THE PROBLEM. PERIOD.

SUPPLY CHAIN





for an International Agreement

We can retain the societal benefits of plastics and protect our environment.

An international agreement, based on our 5 Principles, would require countries to commit to eliminating plastics leakage by a specific date, develop national action plans and promote enabling policies to achieve widespread access to waste collection – the foundation of a circular economy for plastics. Countries should have flexibility to implement solutions based on local circumstances. And multiple low carbon, circular solutions would be encouraged, including innovative advanced recycling technologies that can be deployed widely.

We can meet this challenge and create value instead of waste.

We envision a global agreement on recovering used plastics to help achieve a circular economy, while ending plastic waste and realizing U.N. Sustainable Development Goals.



Have all nations agree to eliminate plastic waste.

Adopt the G20's 2050 Osaka Blue Ocean Vision. Allow countries flexibility to develop regionally appropriate national action plans to eliminate plastic waste leakage based on local circumstances.



Achieve widespread access to waste collection.

Ensure access and improve waste management capacity. Support technology deployment, such as chemical (advanced) and mechanical recycling, to increase circularity of plastics.



Recognize the role plastics play in a lower carbon future.

Support life cycle analysis as a means to evaluate impacts of plastics and alternatives.



Support innovation in product design and recycling technology.

Develop global guidance, with industry input, on product design, recycled content, and optimizing resources.



Measure progress.

Establish, with industry input, globally harmonized definitions and reporting metrics on plastics and plastic waste, using validated and harmonized methodologies.

CONTACT US TO DISCUSS THE PATH FORWARD TOWARD A WELL-CRAFTED GLOBAL AGREEMENT AMONG NATIONS THAT LEADS TO A CIRCULAR ECONOMY FOR PLASTICS.



Joshua Baca

Vice President, Plastics Division
American Chemistry Council

JOSHUA_BACA@AMERICANCHEMISTRY.COM



Stewart Harris

Senior Director, Global Plastics Policy
American Chemistry Council

STEWART_HARRIS@AMERICANCHEMISTRY.COM