WWF

PLASTIC POLICY SUMMIT

Domestic Solutions for a Global Problem

Outcomes and Actions:

Executive Summary

July 2023

Building a Vision for a Plastic Pollution-Free Future

Plastic waste in nature is an urgent issue with major adverse impacts on wildlife, ecosystem health, the integrity of food supplies, communities, and livelihoods. Currently, the equivalent of one dump truck's worth of plastic enters our oceans every minute. By 2040, plastic production is predicted to double and plastic pollution entering the ocean is expected to triple.[1] By 2050, plastic production is expected to account for at least 10%–13% of all global emissions, or 56 gigatons of greenhouse gas emissions annually.[2] With a global treaty on plastic pollution expected to be negotiated by 2025, there is no time to waste in reshaping our current single-use economy.

Moving from a linear to a circular economy requires a reevaluation of the way we do business, use materials, and manage our natural resources. A circular economy requires us all, as stakeholders, to align globally on high-level obligations, nationally on intervention measures, and locally on implementation practices.

Event Overview

On March 29–30, 2023, World Wildlife Fund (WWF) convened the Plastic Policy Summit in Washington, DC, that brought together leaders from all relevant sectors to discuss ongoing efforts to address the plastic pollution crisis and ways in which they can work together to achieve a future in which plastic no longer enters nature. Among the participants were federal agency representatives, state and local policymakers, nonprofit and corporate partners, and members of Congress.

The Plastic Policy Summit identified nine key interventions to reduce plastic pollution through immediate and long-term action items. Each section of the full report focuses on an intervention, providing an overview, the key components of the relevant breakout discussions, the action items that emerged, case studies, and additional resources. These summaries represent the perspectives that speakers and participants shared in discussions and the content from Summit resources shared in the pre-read and throughout the event. The Executive Summary contains select highlights from the Recommended Actions for governments, businesses, and all stakeholders.

Interventions to Eliminate Plastic Pollution

1. Reduce plastic production at the source.
2. Pilot and scale reuse systems.
3. Implement effective Extended Producer Responsibility.
4. Understand and mitigate public health risks of plastics.
5. Increase data transparency and standardization.
6. Maximize public-private partnership outcomes.
7. Empower circularity initiatives in cities.
8. Expand deposit return systems.
9. Drive state policy leadership opportunities.

[1] "Evaluating scenarios toward zero plastic pollution," Science Magazine, July 23, 2020
[2] "Plastic & Climate: The Hidden Costs of a Plastic Planet," Center for International Environmental Law, May 2019

Overarching Themes

The problem and opportunity are clear. Throughout the Summit, participants emphasized that stakeholders already know that plastic pollution is a problem. While it is important to continue gathering data and supporting research on the most effective solutions, the plastic pollution problem is urgent and immediate action is necessary. Solutions have already been identified that could reduce leakage of plastic into the ocean by at least 80% by 2040.[3] Furthermore, curbing plastic pollution offers social and economic benefits, including creating at least 700,000 jobs and improving the health and livelihoods of nearly 11 million waste reclaimers.[4]

Environmental justice must be prioritized. A circular and just economy should ensure that local communities and environments are no longer subjected to the negative impacts of plastic production, use, disposal, or mismanagement. Communities that have historically borne the burden of plastic pollution should be equipped with the tools and funding necessary to mitigate these impacts, prevent future infringements on health and well-being, and restore their communities. Centering environmental justice means working closely with local communities and ensuring they're involved in decision-making processes for planning, implementation, and investment in any new interventions. In addition to ensuring a just approach to future interventions, efforts should be undertaken to remediate the negative impacts that plastic production and pollution have had on many communities. Environmental justice and community-led principles should be incorporated in each of the proposed strategies in this document. Such considerations are included in many of the action items in this document but should not take the place of directly seeking inputs and guidance from local communities themselves.

A full life cycle approach is key. Plastic harms people and the environment throughout its full life cycle, from extraction of fossil fuels and plastic refining processes to plastic use and disposal. Accordingly, a full life cycle approach is necessary to effectively address plastic waste at all levels. A life cycle approach includes pursuing a range of measures to achieve multiple ends: reducing overall virgin plastic production, ensuring product and design standards that limit impacts, reusing and repurposing existing materials to their fullest extent, recycling materials that are no longer in use, and properly disposing of any materials that could leak out into nature. These measures should be supported by strong policies, when possible, and voluntary efforts where policy has not yet advanced sufficiently.

Sam Hurd Photography

[3] "Breaking the Plastic Wave: Top Findings for Preventing Plastic Pollution," Pew Trusts Foundation, July 23, 2020
[4] "Breaking the Plastic Wave: Top Findings for Preventing Plastic Pollution," Pew Trusts Foundation, July 23, 2020

Recommended Actions: For Governments

- **Classify specific harmful toxins in plastic as "pollutants"** or define specific plastic formats as "easily littered," which would enable use of existing systems for pollution reduction and enforcement (e.g., Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act).
- **Set clear definitions and standards** for source reduction, single-use plastics, recyclability, avoidable and unnecessary plastics, and other key terms.
- **Include metric-based targets** for elimination of materials, reuse, recycled content, and reduction of petroleum-based virgin content in any policy mechanisms, whether in statute or in producer responsibility programs, to improve unified outcomes.
- **Gather data to craft effective legislation.** Annual reports, audits, interim targets, and outcomes from local level policies, can be used to measure reduction and inform new policies.
- **Offer federal grant funding for pilots and successful circularity efforts**, such as through the Inflation Reduction Act infrastructure grant programs.
- **Test reuse policies at the local level** and then consider state and federal policies—which build true reuse systems—when legislation is proven beneficial.
- **Develop a national framework for EPR**, which could include overall harmonization of approaches while maintaining flexibility for regional and local implementation that will be the most effective in each area.
- **Use comprehensive needs assessments to understand gaps** in existing data; gaps in current collection, sorting, and reprocessing systems; and the role of the informal sector in domestic markets.
- **Develop solid waste management plans** to understand current local practices and regional differences. Plans should be informed by data collected on what is being produced, used, distributed, and disposed of in each region.
- **Develop and support public-private partnership models** that involve matching, pooled funding, and other ways of expanding available resources, with consistent performance metrics.
- **Deploy resources to cities to initiate and accelerate progress** based on each city's direct needs, then scale effective initiatives on a broader scale (state and federal government).
- **Increase collaboration between local stakeholders** on circularity goals and initiatives, such as developing local forums to increase connectivity and synergy.
- **Reform existing DRS models** that don't create positive returns including expanding community education.
- **Decrease barriers to apply for and report on federal grants** so it is more accessible. This includes streamlining the application process and offering more tools, staffing, systems, language accessibility, and more.

Recommended Actions: For Businesses

- **Assess value chain for opportunities to reduce plastic use** without environmental trade-offs, especially along with other policies/systems.
- **Eliminate problematic materials and additives** from the supply chain so that additives with known health impacts are no longer included in plastics design.
- **Invest in streamlining methods of delivery, product return (at accessible return locations), and sanitization**, with a particular focus on investment in new, large-scale methods to sanitize large volumes of packaging.
- **Drive thoughtful pilots with sufficient investment, education, and time** to accurately measure consumer uptakes and effectiveness of different strategies and technology, and then use these learnings to replicate and scale initiatives.
- **Test new technologies and approaches in closed-loop environments**, which can limit some of the logistics and challenges associated with open-loop spaces.
- **Advocate for and support state and federal legislation to create strong EPR systems**, particularly through demonstrating unified support between different stakeholders and amplifying principles to adequately fund and develop recycling programs.
- **Voluntarily report current plastic use rates** and other data through reporting streams. This will enable companies to set baselines, measure change over time, and prepare for possible required reporting.
- **Incorporate baseline assessments into environmental, social, and governance (ESG) commitments** and track against these metrics.
- **Utilize data to implement effective source reduction efforts**, including testing, measuring, and comparing the outcomes of different reuse, reduction, recycling, and plastic pollution aversion efforts.
- **Replicate and adapt successful public-private partnership models** that have been used to address other social and environmental issues.
- **Partner directly with localities** to pilot circularity initiatives with local support and buy-in, which will increase the likelihood of successes.
- **Interact precompetitively with other companies**, especially start-ups in the space, to advance multiple efforts simultaneously and reduce the variety of different initiatives and systems.
- **Support state and federal legislation** to implement and expand deposit return systems.
- **Advocate for effective, timely legislation in states**, and seek out successful efforts at the state level to advocate for on the federal stage.

Recommended Actions: For All Stakeholders

- **Reduce demand for virgin plastics** through using the U.S. Plastics Pact's Problematic and Unnecessary Materials List, bottle bills, voluntary reduction, and other methods to keep both durable and single-use plastic out of the environment.
- **Develop systems for true cost accounting of plastics**—pricing plastics according to their full life cycle costs, including the cost of landfilling, cleanup of leaked plastic, and monitoring of effluent discharge from production plants, not just their production costs—in order to increase cost parity between single-use and other options.
- **Reduce the complexity and amount of chemicals used in plastics** to protect human and environmental health and improve recycling rates and **fund continued research on plastic health impacts,** particularly on the chemicals whose hazard status is unknown.
- **Advocate for strong provisions in the global plastics treaty** which decreases plastic production, addresses the toxic chemicals in plastics, reduces the chemical complexity of plastics, and protects human, environmental, and community health from plastics' impacts.
- **Support data-gathering and data-sharing efforts** to establish the current baseline for production so the effectiveness of source reduction interventions can be accurately measured.
- **Ensure that consistent and unified metrics are used** to compare packaging outcomes and identify effective local reforms. Metrics can include total weight or percentage of inputs of recycled, composed of biobased, and virgin content.
- **Ensure that all systems are physically and linguistically** accessible so that refill stations, collection centers, and wash facilities are accessible, advertised to consumers, and integrated within communities with minimal disruptions.
- **Promote community education and uptake** by engaging the community from the onset of development, demonstrating the economic benefits, and explaining how to use the systems through attractive, interesting, and comprehensive means. Integrate effective community outreach and participation in programs, particularly by engaging informal waste collectors.
- **Consult communities in siting processes and incorporate them in decision-making processes**—taking into account potential social and environmental impacts—**and ensure they are provided with the necessary tools** to provide input and monitoring.
- **Collaborate among government, corporate, and NGO partners on grants and investment** in reuse, repair, recycling, and composting infrastructure and innovation; use these relationships to help other communities and regions replicate and scale efforts.
- **Participate in regional forums** to share success stories, identify best practices, learn from others' efforts, and brainstorm new opportunities.
- **Increase connectivity between states** that are both considering and actively implementing legislation to share key learnings, standardize approaches where possible, and decrease the up-front work of developing and implementing new policies.
- **Propose and support federal legislation** based on clear examples of state-level success.

CONCLUSION

At WWF's Plastic Policy Summit, participants emphasized the need to take urgent and effective action on plastic waste and pollution. To build a circular economy worldwide, all countries will need to rally together for solutions alongside a full-society approach that extends beyond the national level. Attendees recognized the transformative opportunity provided by the global treaty negotiations, which will provide a common set of goals and, potentially, a common and standardized set of data and metrics to evaluate progress. However, the Summit demonstrated that action cannot wait until a global treaty has been negotiated—existing solutions are available that can and should be taken now. In the United States, that requires national action by agencies, Congress, and the White House to demonstrate our country's commitment to eliminating plastic pollution, including utilizing existing frameworks and strategies. By taking immediate actions to put in place the necessary policies and provide the needed incentives, the federal government can help lead the push for greater ambition in the treaty and lay the groundwork for its effective implementation here at home.

State- and local-level actions also play a critical role in setting and implementing priorities. Local governments can move more quickly on policy and can execute goals and targets within their local contexts. The global plastics treaty should set the standards, objectives, and requirements that will help inform effective policies at all levels—such as mechanisms of monitoring progress and the effectiveness of local initiatives. By demonstrating effectiveness and working out challenges, local policy can lay the groundwork for broader national action and for global action.

The private sector has an incredible opportunity to demonstrate leadership, undertake voluntary actions, and advocate for domestic and global policy. By leading plastic pollution initiatives, companies will improve environmental and health outcomes of materials produced, offer substantial economic opportunities to get ahead of competitors and build new models, and appeal to sustainability-minded consumers. From innovating new ways to reduce harmful materials across the value chains to pioneering reuse systems that strengthen communities and build brand loyalty, companies have clear opportunities to chart a pollution-free future.

NGOs, activists, and academia have played an integral role in defining the plastics problem and advocating for necessary action. Academic and nonprofit entities should continue researching the plastics life cycle, and particularly the effectiveness of various methods of intervention, to minimize negative trade-offs of any efforts undertaken. Through continued advocacy, demonstration of community impacts, and collaboration with both government and corporate actors, NGOs and activists can push for a just and urgent transition to a circular economy.

Core to each of these sector's efforts is collaboration. We cannot succeed without each sector doing its part and working together closely to amplify, replicate, and scale solutions. This report identifies numerous opportunities for partnerships and joint advocacy and encourages all stakeholders to build on the relationships developed at the Summit to stimulate connectivity and collaboration. By advancing the recommendations in this report, companies, NGOs, activists, academia, state and local governments, and the federal government can collectively create a future where plastic no longer enters nature or harms human well-being.