



# Navigating the U.N. Plastics Agreement: Pew's Recommendations for a Global Solution

Ambitious, legally binding measures would help effectively tackle plastic pollution

## Overview

Plastic pollution has become an urgent global challenge. Its exponential growth threatens human health, livelihoods and natural ecosystems, and exacerbates greenhouse gas emissions. Recognizing this critical issue, the United Nations Environment Assembly has convened an Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC) to craft an international legally binding instrument on plastic pollution, commonly referred to as the U.N. plastics treaty.

The Pew Charitable Trusts strongly supports the creation of a legally binding agreement on plastic pollution. As reported in the 2020 Pew report, "Breaking the Plastic Wave", achieving meaningful reductions in plastic pollution demands actions across the entire life cycle of plastic—production, usage, recycling and disposal—a task for which the U.N. agreement will be crucial, provided that it is ambitious and legally binding and takes a holistic approach. Such an approach should encompass environmental and human health considerations across the whole plastic life cycle and ensure a fair and inclusive transition for affected populations.

Key areas that the agreement must cover include reduction of plastic production; bans and phasing out of problematic and avoidable plastic products; improvements in product design; extended producer responsibility—where companies that introduce packaging must pay for its collection, sorting and recycling—and waste management; reductions in emissions of plastic throughout its life cycle; and specific measures to tackle microplastics, one of the most pervasive forms of plastic pollution. The agreement will also need mechanisms to support implementation, such as financial support, as well as mechanisms for reporting and monitoring progress to ensure ambition translates to successful outcomes.

Outlined below are Pew's policy recommendations. These are not exhaustive but centre where Pew is focusing its efforts in relation to the treaty.

# 1. Primary plastic polymers

Studies reveal that the most effective way to curb plastic pollution—and the greatest opportunity to lower plastic’s greenhouse gas emissions—is to reduce plastic production and consumption.<sup>1, 2</sup> A business-as-usual approach, with no change to the status quo, won’t work; the annual production of virgin plastic is projected to increase by 66% from 2019 to 2040 and annual plastic leakage would almost double.<sup>3</sup>

The U.N. agreement can only be successful if it prioritizes reducing the supply of primary plastic polymers.

Recommendations:

- Measures should be implemented that restrict the production and supply of primary plastic polymers, with targets agreed upon at the international level rather than country by country only. Trade provisions should be in place to prevent countries that are not parties to the agreement from exporting virgin plastics or derivative plastic products to countries that are party to the agreement, which could undermine the treaty’s effectiveness and create an unfair market environment. Similar strategies were successful in the Montreal Protocol, a global agreement to phase out ozone-depleting substances in part by restricting their trade.
- Parties must prevent, or mitigate, any adverse effects on human health and the environment from primary plastic polymer production. These effects include habitat destruction, water and land contamination, chemical spills, pellet spills and air pollution. Due to the locations of production facilities, such effects often impact Indigenous Peoples, minority populations, workers and rural communities.<sup>4</sup>
- Subsidies and other financial incentives that bolster plastic polymer production at any production stage must be eliminated. States should ensure that this requirement applies not just to corporations with production facilities within their jurisdiction but also to those with corporate headquarters within their jurisdiction.

# 2. Problematic and avoidable plastic products

Certain plastic products are major—and disproportionate—contributors to plastic pollution. For example, flexible monomaterials such as plastic bags and multilayer plastics such as sachets make up 59% of all plastic production worldwide but contribute 80% of macroplastic leakage from municipal solid waste.<sup>5</sup> The agreement should include a list of products that should be banned, and a second list for which production and use should be phased down.

Meanwhile, some products have microplastics added to them, including a wide range of items such as detergents and cleaning products, cosmetics and agricultural fertilisers. The use of microplastics in these products should be banned according to an agreed timeline.

Recommendations:

- Parties to the agreement must prohibit the production, sale, distribution, import or export of a set list of plastic products and reduce the production, sale, distribution, import or export of a second list of products. Such a provision will provide businesses with a clear framework for implementation and will minimize the risk of illegal cross-border trade that undermines the effectiveness of the provision, which has been the case in some national-level single-use plastic bans.
- Criteria for inclusion on these lists should include the potential adverse effects on human health and the environment across the entire plastic life cycle. Plastic products that are avoidable or possess properties hindering safe and environmentally sound waste management should also be prioritized for inclusion.
- Products containing intentionally added microplastics should be subject to restrictions with a phase-out schedule for removing microplastics or replacing them with natural substitutes.

### **3. Product design, composition and performance**

Not all microplastics stem from intentional product ingredients: In fact, microplastics generated during the use of larger plastic materials constitute about a third of global plastic pollution quantified to date. Notably, microplastics are the primary source of plastic pollution in high-income countries.<sup>6</sup>

Improving product design would help reduce the demand for plastic products and increase reuse, refill and recycling. It can also minimize microplastics that are formed—and emitted—as larger plastic materials degrade.

Recommendations:

- Parties should be mandated to ensure that plastics and plastic products produced within their territories, or available in their markets, adhere to minimum design and performance criteria within agreed-upon time frames.
- The agreement should include legally binding design requirements and emission limits for microplastics, rather than relying on guidelines and other voluntary approaches, which have been ineffective so far.
- The agreement's provisions on microplastics should cover various sources and sectors, including industrial and architectural paint, marine coatings, road and automotive sectors, tyres, textiles, agriculture and construction.
- Given the ongoing work by the U.N. World Forum for the Harmonisation for Vehicle Regulations to establish abrasion limits for tyres, parties should be mandated to establish such limits for tyres as a design and performance requirement. Such a move would significantly reduce the second-largest known source of microplastic emissions.

### **4. Emissions and releases of plastic throughout its life cycle**

Plastic-related environmental pollution can happen throughout the plastic life cycle, not just when products reach the end of their lives, and can originate from a variety of sources ranging from plastic producers to fisheries. For example, an estimated 400,000 metric tons of plastic pellets, flakes and powders—which are used in plastic production, conversion and recycling processes—are released into the environment annually.<sup>7</sup>

Recommendations:

- Contracting parties should be required to prevent and eliminate emissions and releases of plastic polymers, microplastics and plastic products across their life cycles.
- The agreement should mandate best-practice measures for the transport, handling and storage of pellets; establish minimum requirements for standards or certifications schemes; and create clear monitoring and reporting requirements for pellet spills.
- The agreement should also establish mandatory provisions, including emission standards and best practices, for other sources of microplastic emissions. These provisions should focus on the prevention of microplastic emissions at the source, and should cover sectors including construction, agriculture, textiles, plastic producers, converters, recyclers, sports, automotive, industrial, architectural, road and maritime.

### **5. Reporting on progress**

Disclosure and reporting ensure that policymakers, financial institutions, and companies have the data they need to measure and manage progress toward the shared goal of ending plastic pollution and waste.

Recommendations:

- Mandatory corporate disclosure on plastics must be a core element of the agreement.
- This corporate disclosure data should be an integral part of national-level reporting and monitoring processes, which would ensure that parties have comprehensive insights into plastic flows and impacts across their entire economies.
- Mandatory corporate reporting should be broad in scope, encompassing all sectors and pollution types, and considering effects across the entire plastic life cycle. This should require reporting on risks, opportunities, impacts and dependencies across the entire plastic life cycle and throughout the supply, value and distribution chains.

## Conclusion

Overwhelming scientific evidence demonstrates that continuing on the current path of plastic production and consumption will lead to severe consequences, including considerable impacts on human health, vulnerable communities, biodiversity and the global climate. If the INC process is to achieve its goal, governments must agree on comprehensive and legally binding measures that encompass the whole plastic life cycle and provide a clear and coherent framework for action.

The challenges include not only reducing plastic production and consumption, but also improving plastic design, tackling emissions, ensuring a robust framework for implementation and closing loopholes. But progress is achievable if all countries involved adopt an ambitious approach throughout the negotiations.

## Endnotes

- 1 The Pew Charitable Trusts and SYSTEMIQ, "Breaking the Plastic Wave: A Comprehensive Assessment of Pathways Towards Stopping Ocean Plastic Pollution" (2020), [https://www.pewtrusts.org/-/media/assets/2020/10/breakingtheplasticwave\\_mainreport.pdf](https://www.pewtrusts.org/-/media/assets/2020/10/breakingtheplasticwave_mainreport.pdf).
- 2 Nordic Council of Ministers for the Environment and Climate, "Towards Ending Plastic Pollution by 2040: 15 Global Policy Interventions for Systems Change" (2023), <https://pub.norden.org/temanord2023-539/temanord2023-539.pdf>.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 United Nations Environment Programme, "Neglected: Environmental Justice Impacts of Marine Litter and Plastic Pollution" (2021), <https://www.unep.org/resources/report/neglected-environmental-justice-impacts-marine-litter-and-plastic-pollution>.
- 5 The Pew Charitable Trusts and SYSTEMIQ, "Breaking the Plastic Wave."
- 6 Nordic Council of Ministers for the Environment and Climate, "Towards Ending Plastic Pollution by 2040."
- 7 Ibid.

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**For more information, please visit: [pewtrusts.org/plastic](https://pewtrusts.org/plastic)**

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