Statement of Chairman Frank Pallone, Jr.
House Energy and Commerce Committee
Subcommittee on Environment and Climate Change
Hearing on "Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, Reform: Addressing America's Plastic Waste Crisis"

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Recycling has long been an essential tool in our environmental protection toolbox. Unfortunately, it is clear from the plastic pollution in our oceans that our recycling system is simply not working. Plastic pollution is contaminating our air, our land, and our water, and contributing to the climate crisis.

As Co-Chair of the House Recycling Caucus, which I am pleased to lead with Subcommittee Ranking Member Shimkus, this topic is especially important to me. Recycling can play an important role in addressing climate change and reducing pollution in our

communities, while also boosting local economies. But we will only realize those benefits if we modernize an outdated system.

At the same time, we cannot forget that "recycle" is the third "R" in "Reduce, Reuse, Recycle." As we examine ways to address the plastic waste crisis, we must consider what happens to materials both before and after they reach the consumer. That means reducing the amount of waste we generate in the first place, while also creating the right incentives to reuse recyclable materials. And we now understand the important role composting can play in reducing waste going to landfills and contaminants in our recycling stream. This is particularly important if we substitute compostable products for single use plastics and other difficult to recycle items.

For decades, the U.S. shipped most of its recyclables – including 70 percent of its plastic – to China for processing. This was

profitable for American recyclers and hid any environmental cost from the American public. But the truth was that up to 30 percent of the material exported was contaminated, making it unrecyclable.

In 2018, China banned the import of most plastic waste and mixed paper materials as part of an effort to curtail pollution. This policy shift has changed the U.S. recycling market and is forcing us to recognize that much of what we thought we were recycling was actually discarded.

Some municipalities have been forced to scale back their recycling programs, while others are canceling curbside collection altogether. With no viable alternatives, many communities have been left with no choice but to direct their waste to landfills. Many are looking beyond recycling, to efforts to reduce waste to solve this problem. Others are considering or outright adopting bans on plastic bags,

straws, and other single-use plastics. And some cities are employing incineration to turn waste to energy. This offers climate benefits compared to landfilling, but does not offer the same level of environmental benefits as recycling or source reduction.

For certain materials, the recycling system is working relatively well. Aluminum is typically the most valuable material found in home recycling bins, and its recycling process saves 95 percent of the material and energy. Of all the aluminum ever produced in North America, 75 percent of remains in use today.

Unfortunately, that is not the same for plastic. Over the last 60 years, about 8 billion tons of plastic has been produced globally, and about 75 percent –or 6.3 billion tons – has become waste. Why is this the case? It is often cheaper to make new plastic from fossil fuels than to recycle it. And because plastic takes more than 400

years to degrade, most of this waste is either languishing in landfills or found in the environment as litter. One study estimates that there will be more plastic than fish in the ocean by 2050. That is simply unacceptable.

And this pollution contributes significantly to climate change. Last year, global greenhouse gas emissions from plastics production, transport, and disposal were equal to the emissions from 189 coal-fired power plants. That emissions footprint is projected to more than triple by 2050, consuming up to 13 percent of the planet's remaining carbon budget.

Clearly, solving the climate crisis will require strong action to address emissions from the production and disposal of plastic. This Committee has been hard at work developing legislative solutions to address the climate crisis. In January, we released the CLEAN

Future Act, which will put the United States on a path to net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. When we released that draft, we noted several areas needing further work, including waste and recycling issues. I am pleased that we are holding this hearing today to continue that work.

I thank our witnesses for being here today. I look forward to hearing their perspectives on how to modernize our recycling system and our economy to solve our plastic waste crisis and the climate crisis.