

Mr. Tonko's Opening

The Subcommittee on Environment and Climate Change will now come to order. I recognize myself for 5 minutes for the purposes of an opening statement.

Today's hearing is an opportunity for us to begin to examine our nation's waste challenges as well as some potential solutions.

Reducing waste and encouraging recycling can play an important role as we seek to make our nation more sustainable and transition to economy-wide, net-zero greenhouse gas emissions.

I think I am safe in saying that every Member and every witness likes recycling.

And the broader public likes recycling, too, but many people have concerns that materials in their curbside bins often do not end up being recycled.

These concerns are not unfounded.

We know that many recyclable products end up in landfills, and plastic waste in particular is ending up in our environment and our oceans.

So this is a very serious issue, and I am happy to see many Members wanting to get engaged.

In the past few months, there have been numerous pieces of legislation introduced, which I expect we will hear about today. These bills cover marine debris, recycling infrastructure, consumer education, and plastic waste.

Undoubtedly, this interest has been driven by China's decision in 2018 to impose restrictions on imported waste.

For decades, we relied on China as a dumping ground, especially for our low-quality and contaminated waste.

The closure of this market has had major impacts on the U.S. recycling system, causing municipalities to scale back once profitable programs, many of which are now actually costing local governments money.

While China's National Sword policy has surely caused an upheaval, I think we would be mistaken if we simply blamed China for no longer wanting our waste.

This episode has exposed longstanding issues in our system.

We have been sweeping deficiencies in domestic markets, education, and infrastructure under the rug so long as China was willing to accept our waste.

I hope we can see this as an opportunity to reevaluate our domestic efforts and try to understand how the federal government can play a constructive role in improving recycling outcomes.

But we risk falling into a trap if we begin to believe that recycling can be **the** solution to our nation's waste issues.

It is not a silver bullet.

It is worth reminding everyone that we teach children the importance of “reduce, reuse, and recycle”.

There is a reason recycling is third in that slogan. We need to put a much greater emphasis on reducing, first and foremost.

There are meaningful reduction opportunities for all materials, but especially plastics, where there are growing numbers of alternatives for many single use products.

Many state and local governments are now tackling this issue head on, so it is an appropriate time to consider the role of reduction as part of the strategy to address plastic pollution.

We also need to consider how to reduce contamination of waste streams.

American contamination levels are at 25 percent, meaning that one out of every four items placed in a recycling bin should be thrown in the trash.

This is particularly challenging for paper products, which often do have viable, domestic markets if collection and sorting processes work properly, but can be easily contaminated.

Today we will hear about a wide range of potential solutions—improving consumer education, encouraging standardized packaging, designing products to be more easily recycled, and incentivizing recycled content in manufactured products, which can have significant energy reduction and climate benefits.

I look forward to our witnesses advising us on a path forward, because knowing the environmental and climate impacts of plastic waste as well as the newfound economic pressures on local governments' recycling programs, now is the time for us to come

together and embrace some of these commonsense solutions for our nation's waste issues.

I thank our witnesses for being here and look forward to the discussion.