

**Opening Statement of Republican Leader Greg Walden
Subcommittee on Environment and Climate Change
“Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, Reform: Addressing America’s Plastic Waste Crisis”
March 4, 2020**

As Prepared for Delivery

Thank you, Mr. Chairman for recognizing me to speak on our hearing about recycling, waste management, plastics, and how these play a role in our society and the environment.

This is an interesting topic that will give all of us a chance to jump more deeply into an issue that has gained traction since China fully implemented its National Sword policy that bans importing of plastics and other recyclables. In doing so, it will force us to consider many other issues that could raise significant, long-term policy impacts on the quality of life in the United States.

Mr. Chairman, I want us to do work that points us to targeted solutions that will bring meaningful results. I am concerned that this hearing, between its title, explanatory press statement, and the limited number of witnesses, is trying to pack in so many issues that the

subcommittee may not be able to adequately cover or make progress on any individual subject. This is particularly true if this non-specific hearing is meant to satisfy “regular order” requirements for any piece of legislation.

First, the existing legal structure in the Solid Waste Disposal Act has – for the last four and a-half decades – had the federal government setting policy for hazardous waste but left curbside collection of ordinary trash and recyclables to states and local governments. Some of our witnesses are suggesting a federal takeover of some of these responsibilities or precluding the use entirely of sources of waste management, like incineration. Such a move would strand billions of dollars in existing municipal investment and create waste collection and management disruptions and confusion. If this is the direction the Committee wants to go, we need to hear from the EPA, states, counties, and local governments that will be impacted.

Second, recycling rates – regardless of the item being recycled – are driven by quality feedstocks, high commodity prices, efficient collection, infrastructure resources, and effective public education. Some sectors, like paper recyclers, have done a good job making investments to build out their infrastructure and pursue high quality paper economically. Others are suffering because either the price of their commodities is low, they don't have a good collection infrastructure, or both.

As for plastics, there are really two issues: global marine debris and domestic management of plastics.

According to the publication *Nature*, Asia produced 81 metric tons of plastic waste, followed by Europe at 31 metric tons, and North America at 29 metric tons – 0.3 metric tons of which were improperly disposed. EPA is actively working on its Trash Free Waters program to help capture or prevent marine litter from reaching the ocean, something Administrator Wheeler spoke about during last week's subcommittee

hearing. In addition, the private sector is making major investments in attacking this problem.

The domestic management has interesting permutations to it: from single use plastics to low recycling rates. Plastic also shares the lack of domestic collection infrastructure that lead to Asian importation policy against U.S. exports of these items.

I wish we could have heard from the various sectors today to completely explain all these situations for us so we could better understand plastics and the forces in Asia driving their waste laws.

Third, plastic usage also brings up questions about climate change risks and the use of fossil fuels to make plastic. Before people look to remove plastics from the economy on that criteria alone, I think it would be good to have a discussion of what the alternatives look like and not only what their carbon footprint is, but also whether these items make our society safer and more secure. Moreover, we need to look at whether

the trade-off in lifecycle emissions is worse, rather than better as it relates to the climate and the environment.

Mr. Chairman, we have a serious challenge we are trying to tackle today. The answer is innovation, preparation, and adaption. I welcome our witnesses and look forward to hearing from them.