

OPENING STATEMENT
Representative Alan Lowenthal
Subcommittee on Water, Oceans, and Wildlife
Committee on Natural Resources
Oversight Hearing on Plastic Pollution

October 29, 2019

Today we're here to discuss a pressing environmental issue: plastic pollution.

Certainly, single-use plastics have made life easier. But these materials come at a much higher cost than many would like to admit.

Plastics last for centuries in the natural environment and are found nearly everywhere on our planet. Last year I witnessed the impacts of plastic pollution on wildlife in Antarctica, one of the few places on earth that has been relatively untouched by human activity.

Personally, I have been involved in trying to tackle the growing plastic crisis for over 20 years, working with my constituent and friend, Captain Charles Moore, who created the scientific research organization Algalita and who did the early research on the Pacific garbage gyre.

An estimated 8 million metric tons of plastic enter the oceans each year at a rate of about one garbage truck per minute, threatening biodiversity and accumulating in the seafood that we eat and in the water that we drink. Plastic has even been found in water samples from the Capitol Visitors Center!

Plastics are also making climate change worse. The global lifecycle emissions from one year's plastic production are about the same as 462 coal fired power plants per year – and that number is rising.

Plastic production is an environmental justice issue too. Petrochemical factories and incineration facilities are often located in low-income communities, where local health impacts and air quality impacts are significant but often ignored.

Finally, in this subcommittee, we need to look at solutions to deal with ghost fishing gear—fishing gear that's been lost at sea but continues to catch fish, marine mammals, turtles, birds, and corals.

It's clear that we need to reduce plastic pollution. Higher recycling commitments and bans and taxes on single-use plastic items can be part of the solution, but we must expand our tools to address this growing environmental and public health problem.

In this Committee we switched to reusable pitchers and glasses for water, rather than the disposable plastic water bottles we see so often around the Capitol. But not every switch is as easy, and not everyone has the option.

The financial burden of cleaning up pollution should not just be on the taxpayers. It's imperative that the companies that manufacture and sell these products take ownership of their environmental impacts.

Congress needs to step up, too. It is for this reason that I have been working on comprehensive legislation with Senator Udall. Our legislation seeks to create a more circular approach by putting in place an extended producer responsibility program, implementing recycling content standards, as well as phasing out certain single-use only items that have more sustainable alternatives available.

I am excited to announce that we should have a discussion draft of the legislation very soon, which we will disseminate publicly, and I encourage all of you to let me know your thoughts and comments after it is released.

Some federal agencies are also doing their part - NOAA's Marine Debris Program recently funded 14 new projects addressing aspects of this problem. However, the \$2.7 million provided to these projects doesn't even come close to addressing the scale of the ocean plastic problem.

The bottom line is this: we need to do more and we need to look at a broader range of solutions to prevent wildlife from being strangled and to keep microplastics from ending up on our plate.

With that, I look forward to hearing more from our witnesses about their ideas, and I will now invite the Ranking Member to share his remarks.