

**Opening Statement by Congressman Tom McClintock
Ranking Member, House Natural Resources Committee, Sub-Committee
on Water, Oceans and Wildlife
October 29, 2019**

The sub-committee meets today to hear testimony on plastics and their impact on our oceans. From the tenor of the written testimony, it appears that the majority is blaming American consumers for the plastic waste that reaches our oceans and is proposing to place restrictions on them that will dramatically reduce the convenience and higher quality of life that plastics have contributed to our modern society.

Blaming America first seems to be a recurring theme, but the facts paint a very different picture. A 2017 study published in the Environmental Science and Technology Magazine found that between 88-95 percent of all the plastic debris that enters our oceans comes from ten rivers – none of which is anywhere close to the United States: eight of those rivers are in Asia and the other two are in Africa.

According to a [2015 study](#), the top 20 marine plastic polluters produced as much as 10.76 million metric tons of waterborne plastic debris. The United States generated just 0.11 million metric tons – or barely one percent. Indeed, the entire United States contributed less waterborne plastic pollution than North Korea.

Who does the majority blame for this? American consumers. But as Jeanne Kirkpatrick once observed, they always blame America first.

According to [the EPA](#), Americans have increased plastic recycling from 20,000 tons in 1980 to 3.1 million tons in 2015. American consumers go to great lengths to responsibly dispose of plastic waste – and the numbers show that. American consumers are heroes – not villains -- in the fight against plastics pollution of our oceans. We should be celebrating them and not punishing them!

Yet that is just what Draconian restrictions on plastic use would do, starting with the [1.7 million families](#) who depend on plastics manufacturing to put food on the table, roofs over their heads and taxes into our coffers. The single largest state employing them remains my home state of [California](#), where 80,000 Californians are directly employed in the plastics industry.

The misplaced object of the left's ire appears to be single-use plastic containers: the toothpaste tube, the shampoo bottle, the plastic bag. They criticize them as wasteful, since the plastic is used once and discarded and yet take between 50 and 1,000 years to decay.

If they are properly disposed of – and Americans do that better than just about any other people on this planet – I have to ask, what exactly is the problem? The most common single-use packaging of the ancient world – once we had progressed from animal skins and gourds – was the amphora, usually a ceramic. A massive hill called [Mt. Testaccio](#) in Rome is composed of discarded amphorae, which have not degraded in nearly 2,000 years. Yet the world isn't the worse for it – and the Romans were infinitely better off for it.

Which begs the question, if we are going to ban single use plastic containers, exactly what will replace them? How about your toothpaste? Before plastics, toothpaste came in collapsible metal tubes. Do the opponents of plastics find this a more environmentally friendly container? The toothpaste tube was invented to protect consumers from the unhygienic practice of getting toothpaste in glass jars and dipping your toothbrush into them. Shall we return to glass jars? Before that, toothpaste came in powder form in cardboard boxes and wax paper, which required mixing a batch every time you brushed your teeth.

Plastics have largely replaced aluminum as the best container to protect against food spoilage. Before aluminum, it was tin. It takes [four pounds of bauxite](#) usually by strip mining and 7 ½ kilowatts of electricity to make one pound of aluminum. Do the plastic critics really think an environmentally friendly alternative is to return to the era of metal containers? Before metal containers, glass was commonly used. Glass takes roughly one million years to decompose – one thousand times longer than the longest estimate for plastic decomposition. I suppose we could go back to cardboard and paper, but I remember the campaign a decade ago to ban paper bags as wasteful and environmentally offensive. So we dutifully replaced them with plastic bags, which have now attracted the ire of the environmental left.

Single use plastics – properly disposed of – mean greater convenience and lower prices for American consumers, and a much smaller environmental footprint than all the different packaging materials that they replaced.

So I'm very interested in hearing why Americans – with an exemplary record of responsible plastic disposal and recycling – are to blame for the excesses

of other people in other countries; and why those same Americans should now be punished with higher prices, less convenience and a lower standard of living. And finally, I would like to know what the plastics critics are proposing as an alternative to plastic containers, that they haven't already rejected over the years.