

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

December 8, 2020

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
President-Elect of the United States
1401 Constitution Ave NW
Washington, D.C. 20230

Dear President-Elect Biden,

The world faces an indisputable plastic pollution crisis. The rampant production of unnecessary single-use plastic products is driving climate change through increased greenhouse gas emissions that harm local environmental justice communities, both where plastic is made and where plastic is often discarded with commensurate toxic air and water pollution. We urge you and your Administration to tackle this issue comprehensively with significant measures that can be taken independently from Congressional action.

Plastic pollution is everywhere – from visible trash in our streets, sidewalks, parking lots, rivers, and waterways to nearly invisible plastic dust raining down in our landscapes and national parks.^[1] And it doesn't go away – plastics break down into small pieces known as microplastics that make their way into the air we breathe, the food we eat, and the water we drink.

The rise in single-use plastics has come with a tremendous environmental cost. An estimated 17.6 billion pounds of plastic enters the marine environment every year — roughly equivalent to dumping a garbage truck full of plastic into the oceans every minute.^[2] The United States generates the most plastic waste of any country in the world. A recent study found that despite the United States only accounting for 4% of the global population in 2016, the U.S. generated 17% of all plastic waste and ranks third among countries contributing to coastal plastic pollution.

State and local governments across the country are in the throes of an economic crisis, as revenues for important services diminish and costs continue to increase. This includes recycling collection, an industry with exorbitant costs and few commensurate benefits even before the COVID-19 pandemic.

We have also watched mass protests and movements across the country calling for sweeping changes on racial justice. We need only look at the disproportionate impacts that plastic production and pollution have on some of our poorest communities to understand how racial and environmental justice are inextricably linked. Plastic production and processing facilities, much like landfills, oil refineries, and other sources of industrial pollution, are overwhelmingly constructed in low-income communities of color that already bear the brunt of environmental and economic burdens.

These same communities are on the front lines of the climate crisis, which is made worse by the manufacturing of additional virgin plastics. The greenhouse gas emissions linked to this production are estimated to reach 1.3 billion tons by 2030, equivalent to 300 coal-fired power plants.

For years, industry advocates and producers have focused exclusively on downstream solutions, like recycling. The result has been more plastics produced without consideration of their environmental impacts and mounting piles of waste left for local governments to clean up at their time and

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expense. According to a recently released report by the Pew Center, *Breaking the Plastic Wave*, a strategy focused solely on recycling would still result in 18 million metric tons of plastic flowing into the ocean each year by 2040 at the cost of \$140 billion more than business as usual between 2021 and 2040.^[4] We cannot recycle our way out of this problem.

A multi-pronged approach that focuses on limiting plastic and packaging production and a transition to a truly circular economy is the only solution. It will require reducing unnecessary plastic and packaging, finding sustainable substitutes, promoting reusable items, improving recycling practices, and expanding waste collection services. These actions can transform our economy, bolster domestic infrastructure, and create U.S. jobs.

Your Administration can play a critical role in addressing this crisis. Internationally, the State Department and the U.S. Trade Representative should proactively engage with the global community on climate change and plastic pollution issues. At home, the Environmental Protection Agency, Department of Energy, Department of Commerce, Department of the Interior, and the Department of Health and Human Services will all need to be proactive in addressing plastic pollution issues within their jurisdictions.

In the coming weeks, a major group of over 400 environmental and health organizations will unveil their proposal for a Presidential Plastics Action Plan. They have identified eight crucial actions that you as President will be able to take separate from Congress. These actions will immediately set the nation on a pathway to a plastic-pollution-free future, securing a healthier future for our country and our planet.

Each of the described actions will require you as President to prioritize support for communities that historically have been harmed “first and worst:” communities of color, Indigenous communities, and impoverished communities. These actions will provide an opportunity to drive job growth in a new green economy, providing unionized jobs with family-sustaining wages in communities that need it the most, and fighting past and future environmental injustices.

The presidential plan includes:

- Using the purchasing power of the federal government to eliminate single-use plastic items and replace them with reusable products;
- Suspending and denying permits for new or expanded plastic production facilities, associated infrastructure projects, and exports;
- Making corporate polluters pay and reject false solutions;
- Advancing environmental justice in petrochemical regions;
- Updating existing federal regulations to curtail pollution from plastic facilities by using best available science and technology;
- Stop subsidizing plastic producers;
- Joining international efforts to establish binding commitments to reduce plastic use and eliminate single-use plastics; and
- Reducing and mitigating the impacts of discarded and lost fishing gear.

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We will compliment these efforts in the 117th Congress by reintroducing the *Break Free From Plastic Pollution Act*, comprehensive legislation that would make producers responsible for their pollution by requiring them to design, manage, and finance waste and recycling programs. Additionally, this legislation would phase out unnecessary single-use plastic products, create a nationwide beverage container refund program, and establish minimum recycled content standards.

We would be happy to share details of the plan or connect you with relevant stakeholders as you begin your transition so that you can effectively and immediately address the crisis of plastic pollution.

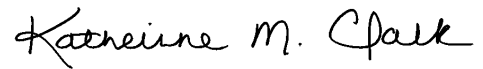
Sincerely,



Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator



Alan Lowenthal
Member of Congress



Katherine M. Clark
Member of Congress