

Disagreements and tempers surge ahead of UN plastics meeting

Advocacy groups criticize recent report that sets tone for meeting

Tensions are running high as representatives from the plastics industry, advocacy groups, and governmental organizations from around the world head to Paris for a meeting of the United Nations' Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC) on plastic pollution.

The meeting, INC-2, takes place May 29–June 2. It is the second of five meetings organized to hammer out an international, legally binding treaty to curb plastic pollution. Negotiators aim to reach consensus by the end of 2024.

Ahead of the meeting, the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) released a report on addressing the causes of plastic pollution. The report, called *Turning off the Tap*, is a starting point for negotiations at INC-2. In the document, UNEP proposes moving away from single-use plastics, pumping up plastics recycling, and using alternative materials to plastics.

Advocacy groups are criticizing the report for including two controversial options to get rid of plastic waste: chemical recycling, which is breaking down plastic materials into chemical components for reuse, and burning plastics as fuel in cement kilns. UNEP has responded to

these criticisms, but not to everyone's satisfaction.

INC-2 is critically important because it serves to organize what the UN calls a “zero draft” of the treaty, says Björn Beeler, international coordinator for the International Pollutants Elimination Network (IPEN), an advocacy group. Member organizations will go over potential options for what the treaty should include and discuss the scope and ultimate objective of the treaty, he says.

“It’s like the rough draft that they’re going to be working with over the next series of negotiations, which is a pretty big deal,” says Claire Arkin, global communications lead at the advocacy group Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives (GAIA). The *Turning off the Tap* report will have a huge influence on what’s discussed at the INC-2 negotiations, she says.

“It’s a very disturbing report on several levels,” Beeler says. It promotes chemical recycling, which is inappropriate because it

goes against the findings of the Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and Their Disposal, he says. Negotiations on that global treaty, which identifies hazardous substances in waste, wrapped up May 12.

There was no consensus that chemical recycling is environmentally sound waste management, Beeler says. “It was unadopted and in bracketed text, which does signify a lot,” Arkin adds.

Several groups are also objecting to the inclusion of the burning, or cofiring, of plastics as fuel in cement kilns as an acceptable disposal option. The practice is a large source of greenhouse gas emissions and a health threat to people

living near cement plants, Arkin says. “If we have these ways out, there is less of an incentive to turn off the tap,” she says.

But UNEP says the report does not promote the cofiring of plastics in cement kilns or incinerators. “These technologies, as well as chemical conversion of plastic to fuel, are mentioned in section 3.2.1 as options when safe disposal facilities are to be used as a last resort,” a UNEP spokesperson says in an email. The options were included to represent what the world might look like in 2040, not to promote plastic burning as the most useful solution, the spokesperson says.

C&EN contacted the Plastics Industry Association and the American Chemistry Council, two industry organizations, for comments on the meeting, but neither offered an interview by the time of publication.

In a statement on INC-2, the Plastics Industry Association says, “Trying to limit plastic production will stifle . . . innovation and result in the production and use of less environmentally friendly alternatives. Instead, the focus should be on fostering a more circular economy where even controlled plastic waste is valued for what it can achieve.”

The third meeting, INC-3, will be held in Kenya Nov. 13–17. The last two meetings will take place in spring and fall 2024.—LEIGH KRIETSCH BOERNER

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Advocacy groups and the United Nations Environment Programme are butting heads on the best way to clean up plastic pollution. They will hash it out at the next negotiating committee meeting, which starts May 29.