

Talks for a plastic pollution treaty are stalling. Could the U.S. be doing more?

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Plastic waste and garbage are seen at a beach in Panama.

LUIS ACOSTA/AFP via Getty Images

Negotiators from about 175 countries have been sparring for more than a year over a treaty to clean up plastic pollution that's choking rivers and piling up in landfills. As a critical new round of deliberations starts this week in Canada, the talks are floundering.

Some scientists and civil society groups say the United States bears a lot of the blame.

Almost every piece of plastic is made from fossil fuels, and major oil and natural gas producers like Russia and Saudi Arabia have also been widely criticized for throwing up roadblocks in the negotiations. However, scientists and environmentalists following the talks say the U.S. exerts outsized influence on the process. The country is the top producer of oil and gas globally, and it has the world's biggest economy, which has historically given the U.S. huge sway in environmental negotiations.

So far, American negotiators have been unwilling to push for measures in the treaty that would drive big cuts in plastic waste, critics say, like caps on manufacturing. Instead, they say, U.S. government representatives have put their weight behind policies around recycling and waste management that are [favored by the country's giant fossil fuel and petrochemical industries](#). Researchers say those actions on their own won't drastically reduce plastic pollution.



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[The world is awash in plastic. Oil producers want a say in how it's cleaned up](#)

"I don't think it's an understatement to say that where we're headed at right now with progress in negotiations is towards failure. And if there's one country that I think is responsible for that, I think it's the United States," says Douglas McCauley, a professor of environmental science at University of California, Santa Barbara, who has consulted with the U.S. State Department about the treaty and is attending the talks in Ottawa.

NPR spoke to seven scientists and environmental advocates who have consulted with the U.S. government about the plastics negotiations, some multiple times. Many of those experts contend that an absence of U.S. leadership is hindering efforts to push forward a treaty with effective regulations. The outcome of the negotiations could also have big implications for human health. A recent study [found plastics contain more than 4,200 hazardous chemicals](#), the vast majority of which aren't regulated globally, according to the researchers.

"It's not that the U.S. is actively opposing some of these policies that could make a difference," McCauley says. "It's that they are showing no action whatsoever, no ambition whatsoever, for adopting any of these policies."

[In a letter to President Biden in March](#), a coalition of more than 300 scientists said policy recommendations the government received from plastic manufacturers — and the government's own stance in the talks to date — are "inconsistent" with efforts to deal comprehensively with plastic waste. And a group of nine Democratic attorneys general whose states are grappling with plastic pollution recently [urged the U.S. treaty delegation to back stronger global rules](#), saying the country is "uniquely positioned" to influence the negotiations.



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"There is an important role the U.S. could play in addressing the growing influence of industry on these negotiations," says Carroll Muffett, chief executive of the Center for International Environmental Law

who is an observer at the negotiations and whose organization has consulted with the State Department about the treaty. "So far, we have yet to see the U.S. on the right side of that issue."

A State Department spokesperson said in a statement to NPR that U.S. officials met with "a wide set of stakeholders" ahead of the negotiations in Canada, and that the country has a "central role in bridging differing positions" in the talks. For an agreement to be effective, it needs to be supported by every country, the spokesperson said, including major plastic producers and consumers.

Matt Seaholm, chief executive of a business group called the Plastics Industry Association, says the U.S. is doing "a very good job of trying to balance all of the interests" of different stakeholders.

"The U.S. government has positioned itself well to drive forward a workable, consensus-based agreement," Ross Eisenberg, president of another industry group called America's Plastic Makers, said in a statement.



A climate activist holds a banner next to a plastic installation after marching to demand reductions in global plastic production ahead of negotiations in Kenya in November 2023.

LUIS TATO/AFP via Getty Images

It's a pivotal moment in the negotiations

The world [produces about 400 million metric tons of plastic waste](#) every year, according to the United Nations Environment Programme — roughly [the weight of every human on the planet](#). Most of it ends up in places like oceans, shorelines and landfills, where it breaks down into tiny pieces called microplastics that have been found in every corner of the environment and inside human bodies.

The problem is getting worse. The amount of plastic waste the world produces is [expected to almost triple](#) in the coming decades, with less than a fifth recycled, according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. So in 2022, countries agreed to [negotiate a legally binding agreement](#) to "end plastic pollution."

With months to go before a deadline to hash out the treaty, interest groups on all sides of the issue say this is a pivotal moment. The last round of negotiations in Kenya [ended in deadlock](#). Afterward, environmental groups warned the talks were at risk of collapsing after some oil- and gas-producing countries blocked a final decision on how to move forward.

The negotiations are happening at a time when the oil and gas industry increasingly sees petrochemicals as a core part of their business. Efforts to limit the risks from climate change threaten demand for fossil fuels, but oil and gas demand for petrochemicals is expected to keep rising for years, [industry analysts say](#).

Magnus Løvold, a policy advisor at the Norwegian Academy of International Law, says fossil-fuel producers including Russia, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Iran and Bahrain "want this process to fail."

An observer at the negotiations, Løvold adds: "The reason for that is that these countries, they have huge oil production, they have a considerable petrochemical industry, so they see that regulation of plastics is a threat to their economic interest."

The U.S. is a giant in those same industries. Booming [production of American natural gas has propelled plastic manufacturing](#) around the world. Last year, the country [produced, consumed and exported a record amount of ethane](#), which is [used in plastic manufacturing](#) and almost always comes from natural gas when it is produced in the U.S.

Experts who have met with the State Department and who have attended the talks say U.S. negotiators could be handcuffed by domestic politics. It would be "probably impossible" for the Biden administration to convince [two-thirds of the Senate to approve](#) a plastics treaty, says Løvold of the Norwegian Academy of International Law.

The U.S. government "does not want to be the bad guy," says Erica Nuñez, head of The Ocean Foundation's plastics initiative who has consulted with the State Department. "I think they do really want to come out of this with some wins. And I think they're very challenged right now in identifying what those wins are [realistically] within the U.S. context."

Against the backdrop of booming fossil fuel production, U.S. negotiators at the talks have declined to back a binding global agreement, say the state attorneys general and environmental advocates who have attended the talks. Instead, they say the U.S. has sought an accord that would leave countries free to decide for themselves how to clean up plastic pollution.

"The U.S. is really trying to reshape what could be a binding global treaty with binding global targets into a ground-up treaty where every country just says, 'Alright, this is what we're willing to do,'" says Muffett of the Center for International Environmental Law. "And that is inadequate."

A State Department spokesperson said the agreement needs to include "universal obligations," but that "overly prescriptive approaches" could dissuade countries that are big producers and consumers of

plastic from joining. Countries should be able to meet their obligations "in ways that take into account their respective priorities and circumstances," the spokesperson said.



The sun sets behind an oil refinery in Texas. Almost every piece of plastic is made from fossil fuels.

MARK FELIX/AFP /AFP via Getty Images

The plastic industry says cutting production is off limits

The plastics industry is fighting on two fronts to block treaty provisions that could constrain manufacturing. It is trying to stop countries from limiting how much new plastic is produced, and it opposes global regulations on the chemicals that companies use.

Scientists and environmental advocates say that to make a significant dent in plastic pollution, countries have to cut how much new plastic they manufacture. But plastic makers and the oil and gas industry, which includes national oil companies and publicly traded corporations, say the world needs all the plastic they can produce, and that negotiators should focus on creating a so-called circular economy where plastic is recycled and reused to prevent waste.

The industry is making that argument at the same time it [tries to fend off scrutiny](#) of a decades-long controversial campaign to sell recycling to the public. Investigations, [including by NPR](#), have shown the plastics industry promoted recycling even though [officials long knew that it probably wouldn't work on a large scale](#). Former industry officials have said the goal was to avoid regulations and ensure demand for plastics kept growing.

Current officials have said those investigations don't accurately portray today's industry.

"We fully and readily admit that we don't recycle enough plastic," says Seaholm of the Plastics Industry Association. "But what we're saying is we want to recycle more. The industry is putting billions of dollars into recycling technologies that get us where we need to be."

Seaholm says the industry also supports policies to encourage recycling, like making producers help pay for recycling infrastructure, and requiring companies to use some recycled material in plastic products.

A lot of experts say recycling will have to be part of the solution, because plastic is ingrained in modern life. But they say governments need to regulate manufacturing for recycling to work. The Business Coalition for a Global Plastics Treaty, which includes major brands like Coca-Cola, Unilever and Walmart, is [calling for governments to phase out "problematic plastics"](#) that are hard to recycle or that are likely to end up as waste in the environment.

A State Department spokesperson said the U.S. is advocating for measures to reduce demand for new plastic, including through government procurement policies. However, the spokesperson said countries wouldn't be stopped from also trying to limit the supply of new plastic. A lot of countries want to do that with caps on manufacturing.

Reducing demand for new plastic is "great," says Nuñez of The Ocean Foundation. But "we still need to directly implement policies to limit fossil fuel extraction — which is something that the U.S. is avoiding," she says.

As for the chemicals that go into plastic, industry representatives say they should be regulated by national governments, not by a global treaty on plastic pollution.

But scientists and environmental advocates calling for global chemical regulations note that plastic waste – and the chemicals it's made from – doesn't stay in the country where it is produced. It floats down rivers and around oceans.

To protect people and the environment, governments that are part of the High Ambition Coalition to End Plastic Pollution, including the European Union, Canada, and the United Kingdom, as well as a number of developing countries from Rwanda to the Maldives, want to ["eliminate and restrict" hazardous plastics and chemicals](#) globally. They also want to force companies to disclose information about the chemicals they use.

"We have the evidence to show that [human health](#) and environmental health are being impacted," says Susanne Brander, an ecotoxicologist at Oregon State University who was on a call recently with the State Department discussing the plastics treaty. "If we can't get information on what's being used," she adds, "we have no way of truly making these products safer."



Pakistani laborers, mostly women, sort through empty bottles at a plastic recycling factory in Hyderabad, Pakistan.

Pervez Masih/AP

Lawmakers and observers warn of industry influence

But groups advocating for aggressive global rules say there's been little progress in the negotiations. After more than a year of talks, governments still haven't come up with a plan that has the "ambition and strength" to limit plastic production and cut down on pollution, the group of state attorneys general wrote to the State Department earlier this month. The group faulted the U.S. delegation for taking a position that "lacks concrete objectives or standards."

"The United States has the power to persuade and to be forward-leaning," says Margaret Spring, chief conservation and science officer at the Monterey Bay Aquarium who has consulted with the State Department on the plastics treaty and is leading a delegation at the talks for the International Science Council. "Right now, you've seen other countries doing that. And so that's been disappointing to many of us."

Negotiators [face intense lobbying](#) from groups that have big financial stakes in the plastics industry. The influence of plastic producers and petrochemical companies is "one of the largest barriers to strong

action," a group of Democrat lawmakers, as well as Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders, an Independent, and Mohammed Chahim, a member of the European Parliament, [wrote recently to Biden and leaders of the UN and European Commission.](#)

Ahead of this week's negotiations in Canada, the industry said it would be a mistake to talk much about manufacturing. "Certainly there are those in the [Biden] administration who would like to see some much more aggressive policies towards our industry, which we certainly don't agree with," says Seaholm of the Plastics Industry Association. "But there are those who are truly honest brokers that we're continuing to work with."