

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM

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Opening Statement

Chairman Harley Rouda

Briefing on “Plastic Production, Pollution and Waste in the Time of Covid-19: The Life-Threatening Impact of Single Use Plastic on Human Health”

Subcommittee on Environment

July 7, 2020

Good afternoon. Today’s briefing will examine the life-threatening impact of our over-reliance on plastics and the health risks associated with plastic production, pollution, and waste during the coronavirus pandemic.

As we are all aware, this is an unprecedented moment in the history of our nation. I would like to offer my condolences to the families, friends, and loved ones of the more than 132 thousand Americans who have lost their lives as a result of the coronavirus. Our hearts go out to those who are grieving, and I want to take this moment to underscore this Subcommittee’s commitment to fight for clean air and water for all Americans – no one, especially during a global respiratory pandemic, should be worried about the safety of the air they breathe or the water they drink.

The need for today’s briefing exists at the nexus of two ongoing public health crises – the coronavirus pandemic and the serious negative health consequences that people in communities across the country are currently facing as a result of our reliance on plastic, especially given this nation’s superfluous consumption of single-use plastics.

We know that every stage of the plastic lifecycle poses significant risks to human health – and the majority of people around the world are exposed to plastic at *multiple* stages during this lifecycle – starting from the production of plastic to the landfill or incinerator stage where many single-use plastics end up. Nearly all of the plastic produced in the United States is manufactured from petroleum byproducts derived primarily from fossil fuels – and, as this Subcommittee has heard before, the extraction, use, and resulting emissions of these substances pose a number of threats to life on Earth.

These threats are of heightened concern during the coronavirus pandemic. Research has shown that pre-existing respiratory and cardiovascular conditions are known comorbidities for COVID-19 – these underlying conditions increase the likelihood of negative outcomes, including increased mortality for those who are exposed to the virus. This link is especially concerning when we consider the disproportionate impact on fenceline communities who are already facing

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challenges as a result of significant air pollution from the outsized impacts of petrochemical facilities and waste disposal sites including landfills and incinerators.

So, what does this mean? The answer is foreseeable but no less heartbreaking – it means that Americans who have disproportionately suffered through decades of industrial pollution – those in majority low-income communities and communities of color – are currently fighting a war on multiple fronts for their lives and livelihoods. For those living in an area in southwest Louisiana commonly referred to as “Cancer Alley,” this is nothing new. In this area of the country, industrial plants collectively release more than 30,000 tons of annual emissions of PM 2.5, a class of particulate matter that, when present in the human body, leads to respiratory illnesses including chronic cough, bronchitis, chest illnesses, and pneumonia—all preexisting conditions that make COVID-19 more deadly. For those commonly overlooked, these struggles demand even more attention, and these continued injustices must not be ignored.

To make matters worse, the health risks associated with plastics does not stop there. In fact, that is only the beginning. When it comes to plastic waste, researchers estimate that more than 8.3 billion tons of plastic have been produced since the 1950s – and about 60% of that plastic has ended up in either a landfill or the natural environment. From the 1950s to the 1970s, only a relatively small amount of plastic was produced, so the waste was manageable. By the 1990s, plastic production increased – and the amount of plastic waste more than tripled. In the early 2000s, our output of plastic waste grew more in a single decade than it had in the previous 40 years combined.

Today, we produce approximately 300 million tons of plastic waste every year – to put that in perspective, that amount is nearly equivalent to the total weight of the ENTIRE human population. These statistics are troubling – especially when we consider the fact that approximately 42 percent of the plastic produced is designed for single-use packaging and the means in which we dispose of this waste has serious negative health consequences. If we incinerate it, then low-income and minority communities can be further burdened by PM2.5 emissions, which has been linked to respiratory infections and an increased risk for certain cancers, such as lung and thyroid cancer. If the plastic is dumped in a landfill, then toxic gases such as carbon dioxide and hydrogen sulfide are emitted from these waste sites as materials begin to breakdown.

And if that is not enough, this overproduction of plastics is resulting in a pervasive amount of microplastics in our water, air, and even our bodies. Worldwide, we are unknowingly ingesting an average of 5 grams of plastic every week. 5 grams might not sound like much, but

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that is like eating the equivalent of a credit card EVERY SINGLE WEEK. That is at least 52 credit cards PER YEAR.

Are we supposed to believe that this is not a harm to our health? I find it extremely difficult to believe that there are ANY benefits of regularly putting this much plastic into the human body, which further underscores the urgency in which we as a country need to significantly cut back our plastics usage.

While some might proclaim a continued reliance on single-use plastics as the safest option to slow or prevent the spread of the coronavirus, it appears that these claims, as presented by groups like the Plastic Industry Association, are aimed at reaping profits for plastic and petrochemical companies. I hope that today's dialogue will help put this misinformation to rest.

Even if it were possible to phase out unnecessary plastic tomorrow, it would take up to 1,000 years for some of what's being produced right now to biodegrade. It's clear that, in order to meaningfully address the varied, serious risks of plastics overproduction, we must continue to further our scientific understanding and overhaul how we produce, use, and dispose of plastic.

Just because this challenge is difficult doesn't mean that we should shrug our shoulders and do nothing – I believe the seriousness of the problem and the impacts we'll hear today emphasize just how important the need for thoughtful solutions and changes in behavior are to securing a livable future for all. I call on each and every one of us to do our part. Especially during these challenging times, we must do all what we can to safeguard the health and safety of ALL Americans.

Thank you, and I invite the Ranking Member of the Subcommittee, Mr. Keller, to give a five-minute opening statement.

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