The U.N. Plastics Agreement: Pew's Recommendations for a Global Solution

Ambitious, legally binding measures would help effectively tackle plastic pollution

Overview

Plastic pollution has become an urgent global challenge. Its exponential growth threatens human health, livelihoods and natural ecosystems and exacerbates greenhouse gas emissions. Recognizing this critical issue, the United Nations Environment Assembly has convened an Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC) to craft an international, legally binding instrument on plastic pollution, commonly referred to as the U.N. plastics treaty.

The Pew Charitable Trusts strongly supports the creation of such a legally binding agreement. As outlined in the 2020 Pew report "Breaking the Plastic Wave", achieving meaningful reductions in plastic pollution demands actions across the entire life cycle of plastic – production, usage, recycling and disposal – a task for which the U.N. agreement will be crucial, provided that it is ambitious and legally binding and takes a holistic approach. Such an approach should encompass environmental and human health considerations across the whole plastic life cycle and ensure a fair and inclusive transition for affected populations.

Key areas that the agreement must cover include reduction of plastic production; bans on and phase-out of problematic and avoidable plastic products; improvements in product design; extended producer responsibility – in which companies that introduce packaging must pay for its collection, sorting and recycling – and waste management; reductions in emissions of plastic throughout its life cycle; and specific measures to tackle microplastics, one of the most pervasive forms of plastic pollution. The agreement will also need mechanisms to support implementation, such as financial support, and for reporting and monitoring progress to ensure that ambition translates to successful outcomes.

Outlined below are Pew's policy recommendations. These are not exhaustive but centre on the areas where Pew is focusing its efforts in relation to the treaty.

1. Primary plastic polymers

Studies reveal that the most effective way to curb plastic pollution – and the greatest opportunity to lower greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from plastics – is to reduce plastic production and consumption.[1] A business-as-usual approach, with no change to the status quo, won't work; the annual production of virgin plastic is projected to increase by 66% from 2019 to 2040, over which time annual plastic leakage would almost double.[2] If primary plastic production continues to grow from current levels, by 2050, GHG emissions from plastic production could amount to a quarter of the remaining global carbon budget – the total amount of carbon dioxide that can be emitted by all GHG sources if the planet is to avoid global warming above 1.5°C and the catastrophic consequences.

During the INC negotiations, nations from around the world have repeatedly expressed strong support for reducing the production of primary plastic:

- More than 50 countries have signed the Bridge to Busan declaration – named for the location of the November 2024 INC-5.1 meeting – which calls for "a global objective regarding the sustainable production of primary plastic polymers, which may include production freezes at specified levels, production reductions against agreed baselines or other agreed constraints to prevent the unsustainable production of primary plastic polymers."[3]
- During INC-5.1 in November 2024, over 100 countries issued joint proposals for the Conference of the Parties to adopt a global target to cut primary plastic polymer production to sustainable levels and for parties to take steps to achieve that target and report on their production, imports and exports of primary plastic polymers.
- The December 2024 Stand Up for Ambition statement, signed by 85 countries, reiterated the call for a global target.[4]
- At the June 2025 United Nations Ocean Conference, 95 ministers signed The Nice Wake Up Call for an Ambitious Plastics Treaty, which highlighted the adoption of a global target for production and consumption of primary plastic polymers, among other measures.[5]

To meet its goals, the eventual U.N. agreement must prioritize reducing the supply of primary plastic polymers. If it instead focuses exclusively on waste management, it would reduce plastic leakage into the environment by only about a third from 2020 levels, well short of what is needed to effectively tackle plastic pollution.[6]

Recommendations:

- Measures that restrict the production and supply of primary plastic polymers should be agreed as part of the treaty's key provisions. To avoid undermining the treaty's effectiveness and creating an unfair market environment, trade provisions should be in place to prevent countries that are not parties to the agreement

from exporting virgin plastics to countries that are party to the agreement. Similar strategies were successful in the Montreal Protocol, a global agreement to phase out ozone-depleting substances.

- Parties must prevent, or mitigate, any adverse effects on human health and the environment from primary plastic polymer production. These effects include habitat damage, water and land contamination, chemical spills, pellet spills and air pollution. Because of the locations of production facilities, such effects often impact Indigenous peoples, minority populations, workers and rural communities.[7]
- Subsidies and other financial incentives that bolster plastic polymer production at any production stage should be eliminated. To support implementation of this requirement, the treaty should include references to subsidies under the transparency, implementation and compliance, and reporting requirements.
- Countries should report on production, import and export of primary plastic polymers. Targets should be able to be modified through the treaty's periodic assessment and monitoring provision to allow for adjusting measures over time via decisions of the Conference of the Parties.

2. Problematic and avoidable plastic products

Certain plastic products are major – and disproportionate – contributors to plastic pollution. For example, flexible monomaterials such as plastic bags and multilayer plastics such as sachets make up 59% of all plastic production worldwide but contribute 80% of macroplastic leakage from municipal solid waste.[8] The agreement should include a list of products that should be banned globally, and a second list for which production and use should be phased down.

Meanwhile, some products have microplastics intentionally added to them, including a wide range of items such as detergents and cleaning products, cosmetics and agricultural fertilisers. The use of microplastics in these products should be banned according to an agreed timeline.

Recommendations:

- Parties to the agreement should prohibit the production, sale, distribution, import or export of a set list of plastic products and reduce the production, sale, distribution, import or export of a second list of products. Such a provision would provide businesses with a clear framework for implementation and would minimize the risk of illegal cross-border trade that undermines effective implementation, which has been the case in some national-level single-use plastic bans.
- Criteria for inclusion on these lists should include the potential adverse effects on human health, biodiversity and the environment of a product during its life cycle or a product's lack of circularity – meaning cases in which products are inherently single-use or of low recyclability.
- Products containing intentionally added microplastics should be subject to restrictions with a phase-out schedule for removing microplastics or replacing them with natural substitutes.

3. Product design, composition and performance

Upstream interventions, such as improving product design, could help limit plastic pollution by increasing the reuse, refill and recycling of products, potentially reducing demand for new virgin plastics and limiting leakages of plastic and microplastic throughout the plastic life cycle.

The Conference of the Parties should develop product design and performance criteria and keep them updated, using a "start and strengthen" approach to allow the measures to evolve over time. Product design and performance and criteria can, for example, help reduce microplastic pollution high up in the life cycle of plastics.

In particular, as tyres and textiles wear, they shed microplastic particles. Specific product requirements for textiles, such as for clothing designs and fabrics that create fewer particles, could limit shedding by up to 80%.[9] Similarly, setting global tyre abrasion standards, such as through design requirements, would significantly reduce the second-largest known source of microplastic emissions.[10]

Recommendations:

- The agreement should include specific legally binding design and performance requirements to reduce microplastic emissions from products, especially paints, tyres, textiles and plastics used in agriculture and construction, in a dedicated annex.
- The treaty should require parties to ensure – within agreed-upon time frames – that plastics and plastic products produced or available in their territories adhere to minimum design and performance criteria.
- Given the ongoing work of the U.N. World Forum for Harmonization of Vehicle Regulations to establish abrasion limits for tyres, the treaty should require parties to establish tyre design and performance requirements.[11]

4. Emissions and releases of plastic throughout its life cycle

Plastic-related environmental pollution does not happen only when products reach the end of their lives, but throughout the plastic life cycle, and can originate from a variety of sources, including plastic production, single-use products, recycling activities and sectors such as agriculture and fishing. For example, an estimated 400,000 metric tons of plastic pellets, flakes and powders – which are used as raw material in plastic production, conversion and recycling processes – are released into the environment annually as a result of accidents or poor handling practices.[12]

Recommendations:

- Contracting parties should be required to prevent and eliminate emissions and releases of plastic across the full life cycle of plastic materials and products. The Conference of the Parties should support the identification of sources leading to plastic releases and leakages.
- The Conference of the Parties should, at its first meeting, adopt an annex outlining minimum requirements, decisions and guidelines on the best available techniques and environmental practices for preventing releases and leakages into the environment, including, where relevant, by sector, and it should establish dedicated programs to pursue this work.
- The agreement should establish mandatory minimum requirements for pellet loss prevention, containment and clean-up during plastic production, handling, conversion, recycling and transport; the agreement should also create clear monitoring and reporting requirements for pellet spills, which are a major contributor to microplastic pollution.

5. Reporting on progress

Disclosure and reporting ensure that policymakers, financial institutions and companies have the data they need to measure and manage progress towards the shared goal of ending plastic pollution and waste.

Recommendations:

- Mandatory corporate disclosure on plastics should be a core element of the agreement.

- This corporate disclosure data should be an integral part of national-level reporting and monitoring processes, which would ensure that parties have comprehensive insights into plastic flows and impacts across their entire economies.
- Mandatory corporate reporting should be broad in scope, encompassing all sectors and pollution types, and considering effects across the entire plastic life cycle. This should require reporting on risks, opportunities, impacts and dependencies across the entire plastic life cycle and throughout the supply, value and distribution chains.

Conclusion

Overwhelming scientific evidence demonstrates that continuing on the current path of plastic production and consumption will lead to severe consequences, including considerable impacts on human health, vulnerable communities, biodiversity and the global climate. If the INC is to achieve its goal, governments must agree on comprehensive and legally binding measures that encompass the whole plastic life cycle and provide a clear and coherent framework for action. This is achievable, but only if all countries involved adopt an ambitious approach throughout the negotiations.

Endnotes

1 The Pew Charitable Trusts and SYSTEMIQ, "Breaking the Plastic Wave: A Comprehensive Assessment of Pathways Towards Stopping Ocean Plastic Pollution," 2020, https://www.pewtrusts.org/-/media/assets/2020/10/breakingtheplasticwave_mainreport.pdf. Nordic Council of Ministers for the Environment and Climate, "Towards Ending Plastic Pollution by 2040: 15 Global Policy Interventions for Systems Change," 2023, https://pub.norden.org/temanord2023-539/temanord2023-539.pdf.

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10 Barouch Giechaskiel et al., "Environmental and Health Benefits of Reducing Tyre Wear Emissions in Preparation for the New Euro 7 Standard," *Sustainability* 16, no. 24 (2024): 10919, https://doi.org/10.3390/su162410919.

11 Barouch Giechaskiel et al., "Environmental and Health Benefits of Reducing Tyre Wear Emissions."

12 Nordic Council of Ministers for the Environment and Climate, "Towards Ending Plastic Pollution by 2040."

Editor's Note: This fact sheet was updated in October 2024 and again in July 2025 to revise the recommendations based on the latest INC negotiations.

For more information, please visit: pewtrusts.org/plastic

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