



U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COMMITTEE ON
SCIENCE, SPACE, & TECHNOLOGY

Opening Statement

Chairwoman Haley Stevens (D-MI)
of the Subcommittee on Research and Technology

Subcommittee on Research and Technology Hearing:
Closing the Loop: Emerging Technologies in Plastics Recycling
April 30, 2019

Good afternoon and welcome to this hearing to review the state of plastics recycling technology in the United States. A warm welcome as well to our distinguished group of witnesses. This is going to be an informative and engaging panel and I am looking forward to hearing your testimony. I'm particularly excited to welcome Mr. Paul Sincock, a local leader from a city in my district, who has worked for the city of Plymouth for over 40 years.

It has been a decade since the Science Committee last held a hearing on recycling and the challenges have only grown. During this hearing, we will examine recycling technologies and the technology gaps that prevent more of our plastics from being recycled, especially in light of China's new policy to ban the import of most postconsumer recyclable materials, including plastics, which the U.S. and other developing countries have been shipping there for the past 25 years. While some businesses were selling China clean and well sorted plastics, others were not. This was cited as a main reason for the ban.

As we'll hear from Mr. Sincock, one of the things I've heard about from local leaders in my district are the challenges they're facing in maintaining their recycling programs. As waste management companies are no longer able to sell recyclables to China, they are driving up their pricing to recoup costs – costs that fall squarely on our municipalities.

In many cases, U.S. cities are being forced to cut longstanding recycling programs and are instead incinerating recyclables or leaving them in landfills, releasing dangerous emissions. Americans who are trying to do the right thing for our environment are left unaware that their efforts are for naught.

Last week, I wrote a letter to EPA Administrator Andrew Wheeler to express my deep concern that the federal government is not doing more to build up our own recycling and waste management infrastructure to help cities and states with this burden. I would like to submit this letter for the record.

Plastic, most of which takes hundreds of years to break down naturally, has been a particular problem. We're seeing record amounts of plastic in our water system, including the Great Lakes, because we don't have the capacity to process the volumes of waste we are creating.

Plastic is unquestionably convenient, and global production of plastic has soared from 2 million tons per year in 1950 to 400 million tons today. Most of our current U.S. recycling infrastructure is decades old and not built to process the amounts of plastic we have today.

Likewise, our recycling policies haven't kept pace with today's plastic use. The last comprehensive Federal law to improve recycling is the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act of 1976. The most recent publicly available EPA data on the economic impact of the recycling industry is from 2007.

The Department of Commerce never acted on a 2007 GAO recommendation for the agency to develop a strategy to stimulate the development of domestic recycling markets. Instead, Commerce actively sought to build international markets. As a result, the U.S. failed to invest in technology and materials to make the recycling process more efficient.

This is a familiar story about crumbling infrastructure, lost industrial capacity, and lack of leadership. However, China's new policy, while in the short term puts us in crisis mode, should also be seen as an opportunity for the longer term. And we need to start now.

Our first response should be to reduce and reuse more. But it is not realistic to think we can give up disposable plastic altogether. We urgently need a national strategy to build out our country's recycling infrastructure. At the same time, we must invest in research and development of sustainable materials and processes as well as in standards.

A concerted effort will make recycling more cost-effective for our local governments, while making it easier for the public to participate. In doing so, we can inspire a sustainable manufacturing environment, and above all, reduce emissions to save our earth.

I look forward to today's testimony and discussion. I hope it is just the beginning of this Committee's efforts to contribute to smart solutions to our nation's recycling challenges.

Thank you.