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:
Plastic Waste Reduction and Recycling Research: Moving from Staggering Statistics to Sustainable Systems

June 24, 2021

Good morning, and thank you to all of the witnesses for joining us today

Two years ago, I had the honor of chairing the first hearing on recycling in this committee for over a decade. Since then, much has changed but the problem of plastic waste and how to enable a circular economy of recycling continues.

We only have to look to the past year and a half to see some of the important medical and safety functions of plastic. Face shields, face masks, and other personal protective equipment allowed America's essential workers to be on the front lines of our nation's COVID-19 response. Disposable syringes are helping deliver vaccine shots in arms all across the country.

Plastic can be designed to be rigid enough to use in vehicle safety applications, durable enough to hold liquid products for years, and flexible enough to keep our food fresh. Virgin plastic is also cheap to produce.

Unfortunately, the characteristics that make plastic convenient also make it difficult to recycle and to manage after it has been used.

Global plastic production increased from 2 million tons per year in 1950 to 400 million tons annually in recent years. What's more, if current trends continue, plastic production is projected to quadruple by 2050. There is no silver bullet, but we do know where to start - reduce, reuse, and recycle. Historically, the U.S. has not done a great job at recycling. We recycle less than 9 percent of our plastic waste.

For more than 20 years, the U.S. shipped our plastic waste to international markets to be recycled. When one of the major markets closed in 2018, items collected for recycling sat in warehouses because many cities across the nation didn't have a local recycler that could process

these bales of plastic, which were too often highly contaminated. Unfortunately, communities faced the choice of incinerating recyclables or dumping them in landfills.

While market, economic, and other factors led to the current plastic pollution crisis, part of the solution can be to invest in research to reduce plastic waste and improve domestic recycling infrastructure and capabilities.

This past Earth Day, I was proud to reintroduce the Plastic Waste Reduction and Recycling Research Act with my colleague from Ohio Congressman Anthony Gonzalez. The bill calls on the Federal government to develop a strategic plan for plastic waste reduction and directs the Office of Science and Technology Policy to establish a program to leverage the expertise of federal science agencies, academia, scientific associations, State and local governments, and the private sector.

It will support research and international standards development to spur innovative sustainable solutions that could create a world-leading U.S. industry in plastics recycling. Research is needed into how to design plastics to be recyclable, upcycle existing plastic into high-value products, minimize environmental impacts of plastic waste and recycling on our climate, and to improve plastic waste management to prevent plastic from entering our air, soil, and oceans.

Finally, this legislation would support the measurement science needed to make sorting technologies more efficient and to update standards for characterizing the multilayered plastic packaging materials used today.

No one solution will completely solve plastic pollution; rather, it will take multiple efforts. The research supported in this bill can drive innovation and innovation is at the heart of American industry and manufacturing that creates jobs.

I look forward to hearing from our distinguished witnesses as our Committee explores challenges and opportunities for adopting sustainable upstream plastic waste reduction solutions and improvements to the recycling system.