

Time to dump harmful plastic production

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GREEN SPACE

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Waging a successful war on plastic pollution requires more than talking trash. Policymakers and legislators must reduce the product at its source before it even has a chance to pollute.

That's why activists gathered at Sen. Alex Padilla's San Francisco office on July 20 to urge his support for the Break Free from Plastic Pollution Act and a National Bottle Bill. The federal bills would prevent plastic pollution, address the climate crisis, protect communities and create jobs by making producers fiscally responsible for collecting, recycling and composting products.

“Plastic pollution is a production issue. We have very little choice in how many plastics we’re consuming,” Alexis Goldsmith, said national organizing director for the nonprofit Beyond Plastics, which helped organize the rally. “The Act shifts the focus from the waste end to the production end.”

Currently, individuals, communities and small businesses are shouldering the effort to keep The City’s beaches, streets and parks clean. San Franciscans carry their reusable totes, refill their mugs and refuse unnecessary swag, condiments and products. Local policymakers have pioneered municipal composting programs and banned plastic bags, straws and Styrofoam. But these contraband items and many other unnecessary products remain frustratingly ubiquitous.

By targeting plastic production instead of waste, policymakers can shift the burden where it belongs — on to the fossil fuel industry. If governments transfer subsidies from oil and gas to reuse and repair businesses (that already exist), it could help the environment and create more jobs. Unfortunately, too many places in the U.S. are still banking the future on fossils.

In Louisiana, for example, the St. James Parish Council expedited permits for a Chinese-owned plastic plant. The Council also granted it property tax exemptions and rezoned the land without consulting the community. The area, known as Cancer Alley, is home to mostly low-income Black communities and approximately 200 petrochemical plants, pipelines and oil depots. The company only withdrew its application after it was faced with herculean community opposition.

In Appalachia, leaders are helping gas, plastics and chemicals replace coal as the bedrock industry. Former Pennsylvania, Gov. Tom Corbett gave Shell tax breaks for every gallon of ethane, a feedstock for plastics, it purchases from Pennsylvania-based natural gas drillers. And in Ohio, Gov. Mike DeWine has expressed worry that foreign-owned plastic producers would pull back from new plants in the region.

“The short-term decision making is corrupt,” Leatra Harper with Concerned Ohio River Residents told me. “Our leaders are allowing the fossil fuel industry to remain on life support. Imagine if policymaking at the governmental level embraced good and practical ideas that will put people to work in cleaner, more sustainable industries?”

There are some bubbles in the U.S., including San Francisco, where policymakers recognize the economic benefits of environmental action. But necessary legislation to combat plastic has even struggled in California. If leaders are serious about addressing the climate crisis while putting people to work, they must pass comprehensive legislation to dismantle the still-too-powerful fossil fuel industry. This is why it’s critical for Sen. Padilla and others to sign on to the Break Free From Plastic Pollution Act and a National Bottle Bill.

Californians can also give the state authority to regulate plastic production by voting for the California Recycling and Plastic Pollution Reduction Act in November 2022. The referendum, which is sponsored by San Francisco's recycling provider Recology and environmental groups, recognizes that recycling is incredibly difficult, if not impossible. If California voters pass the referendum, the state could require producers to make their products reusable, recyclable or compostable by 2030 and reduce the amount of single-use packaging by 25%.

"Californians understand that plastics are not benign," Heidi Sanborn, executive director of National Stewardship Action Council, told me. "Fires are raging. We're in a megadrought. How bad must it get before we finally stop further damaging the climate?"

Unfortunately, if we go much farther we may suffer the same fate as the dinosaurs we're digging up and burning. Local and state lawmakers should not waste any more opportunities to break the addiction to plastic.

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