A Background: How We Got Here and What’s Next

**The crisis**
Annual global production of plastic has reached 335 million tons and continues to rise. Global plastic production is projected to more than triple by 2050, accounting for 20 percent of all global oil consumption. Of the 8.3 billion metric tons of plastic produced in the past 60 years, 6.3 billion metric tons have become plastic waste.

The United States alone disposes or incinerates 32 million tons of plastic each year. Every year, enough plastic—about 8 million tons—escapes into the ocean that five trash bags would fit on every foot of coastline around the world. In addition to ocean pollution, plastic is contaminating every corner of the world, including miles above us in the rainwater sustaining Rocky Mountain National Park.

**How we got here**
While plastic is an important material for building a variety of products like medical devices, lighter cars and other advanced products, plastic producers have steadily designed unnecessary products that have flooded the market. These products have overwhelmed waste management systems, as many of them are not recyclable. Producers are not required to incorporate recycled content into their products and the cost of virgin plastic from cheap natural gas is far lower.

Rather than reducing the waste they create or taking responsibility for its management, producers have shifted the responsibility for managing waste to government entities whose budgets are already stretched thin. Meanwhile, industry has promoted pollution reduction strategies that put even more burden on taxpayers instead of taking responsibility themselves—emphasizing their view that the government should invest in recycling infrastructure and accept plastic items in recycling bins that will never be recycled. All of this comes at the expense of U.S. taxpayers.

**Reforming Our Broken Recycling System**
We cannot recycle our way out of this crisis or rely solely on the government to clean it all up. According to data from the United States Environmental Protection Agency, the US Census Bureau Trade Data and plastic industry recycling reports, the national recycling rate for plastic waste in the United States is projected to sink from 8.4 percent in 2017 to about 5 percent in 2019. Consumers have been led to believe that everything they put in their blue bin will be magically turned into a new product somewhere because items are labeled recyclable.

The truth is that the recycling in our blue bins is often landfilled, incinerated, or shipped overseas to countries that are unable to manage this waste. Before 2017, the United States was sending 4,000 shipping containers a day full of American waste to China every year. But China has changed its import policies, severely restricting the amount of contaminated and poorly sorted plastics it would accept. China’s policy shift means that fewer plastic products have a recycling market. Those materials are now being landfilled, burned, or shipped to
other countries who cannot manage the influx of this waste – meaning that most of it ends up burned or contaminating the ocean.

How Plastic Fuels Climate Change
The oil and gas industries are investing in unprecedented plastic expansion. The industry announced $164 billion in investments for 264 new plastic facilities or expansion projects in the United States alone, many relying on state and local tax incentives. In just five years, these investments could increase global plastic production by a third. As a result, this wave of investment will increase pollution risks to frontline communities – communities closest to these facilities – throughout the plastics supply chain. They will also undermine efforts by cities, countries, and the global community to combat the growing plastics crisis, and exacerbate the growing climate crisis.

In 2019 alone, the production and incineration of plastic will add more than 850 million metric tons of greenhouse gases to the atmosphere – equal to the pollution from 189 new 500-megawatt coal-fired power plants. If plastic production and use grow as currently planned, by 2030, these emissions could reach 1.34 gigatons per year – equivalent to the emissions released by more than 295 new 500-megawatt coal-fired power plants.

We Must Act Now, and Act Boldly
All of this is placing a tremendous strain on our environment and on our budgets. Wildlife and sea creatures are suffering and dying from ingesting plastic products or getting entangled in them. Plastic, which does not biodegrade, is breaking down into microplastics that are contaminating our food, water and air. A growing body of research is finding plastic and associated toxins throughout the food web, including in our blood, feces, and tissues. Exposure to these toxins has been linked to cancers, birth defects, impaired immunity, endocrine disruption, and other ailments. With local governments spending millions of dollars to manage plastic waste and prevent it from entering our rivers, streams, oceans and landscapes, citizens are being hit by the impacts of plastic pollution from all ends.

The time has come to truly address this massive crisis. Countries are working together across the world to reduce plastic production and handle their waste efficiently. Here in the United States, state and local governments are implementing policies to reduce unnecessary plastic products and shift responsibility to producers for managing their waste. Many businesses are already leading the way with investments in reusable packaging and increased recycled content of their products.

It’s time for national leadership and a comprehensive strategy to steer the country in the right direction. The Break Free from Plastic Pollution Act is the bold action we need to tackle this crisis head-on.

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