

High-stakes talks to end plastic pollution resume

May 25 2023, by Benjamin LEGENDRE, Kelly MACNAMARA



Waste collectors looking for plastic and glass to recycle in Pazundaung Creek, Yangon.

Negotiations on a global treaty to combat plastic pollution will resume Monday, with nations under pressure to stem the tide of trash amid calls

from campaigners to limit industry influence on the talks.

Some 175 nations pledged last year to agree by 2024 a binding deal to end the pollution from largely fossil fuel-based plastics that is choking the environment and infiltrating the bodies of humans and animals.

The May 29-June 2 talks in Paris are tasked with agreeing the first outline for actions that could form the basis of a draft negotiating text.

A global ban on [single-use plastic items](#) and "polluter pays" schemes are among the measures under discussion.

Last month wealthy G7 nations—United States, Japan, Germany, France, United Kingdom, Italy and Canada—committed to zero [plastic pollution](#) by 2040.

They said it was an attainable goal thanks to the rise of the circular economy and the possibility of reducing or banning single-use plastics and non-recyclables.

Campaigners are pushing for the talks to go further and focus on cutting the amount of [plastic](#) that gets made in the first place.

Plastic production has doubled in 20 years. It wraps food, is woven into clothes and the fabric of buildings, and is an important material for disposable medical products.

In 2019, a total of 460 million tonnes (Mt) of the stuff was made, according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which predicted production could triple again by 2060 without action.



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'Once-in-a-generation'

Around two-thirds of plastic waste is discarded after being used only once or a few times, and less than 10 percent is recycled.

Millions of tonnes of plastic waste are dumped in the environment or improperly burned, polluting the air. Over time, it breaks down into tiny fragments that have been found everywhere from [mountain tops](#) and the deepest sea trenches, to inside human blood streams and placentas.

In a report published in mid-May, the United Nations Environment

Programme (UNEP) called for systemic change to wean societies off throwaway consumerism by significantly scaling up reuse and recycling, while promoting alternative materials.

It said this would help slash annual plastic pollution 80 percent by 2040 overall and cut single-use plastic production by half.

But campaigners want a greater focus on slashing production.

The treaty is a "once-in-a-generation opportunity to solve the plastics crisis", said Louise Edge, Global Plastics Campaigner for Greenpeace UK, in an [open letter](#) this week raising concerns about industry influence in the negotiations.

"Whether it succeeds or fails depends on whether governments are bold enough to ensure that the treaty delivers what the science says is needed—a cap and phase down of plastic production."



Plastic waste exceeded 350 million tonnes in 2019, with less than 10 percent of it recycled, the OECD has said.

Ambitions

Reduction of plastic use and production is at the top of a plan devised by a "High Ambition" coalition of 53 countries, led by Rwanda and Norway and including the European Union, Canada and Mexico.

Other nations are pushing instead for a reliance on recycling, innovation and better waste management.

As in the UN negotiations on climate and biodiversity, financing is a key point of tension.

Rich economies have historically polluted more—and for years exported trash for recycling to poorer nations, where it often winds up in the environment.

Some [developing nations](#) are concerned about rules that might place too great a burden on their economies.

The binding nature of the treaty is also still in question.

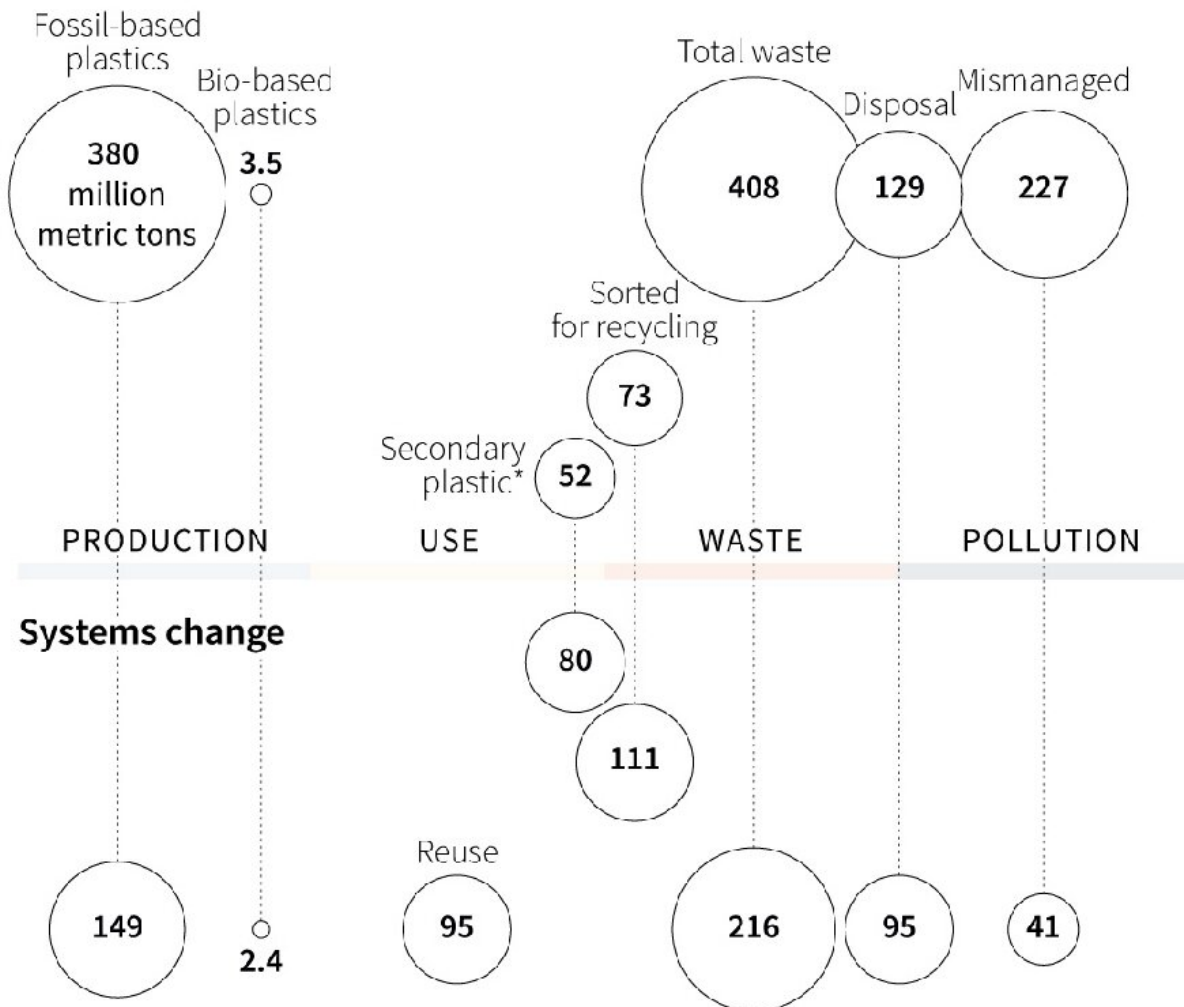
The United States, for example, wants to limit the legal scope of the agreement, leaving signatories free to develop solutions in national plans, said a spokesperson from the French foreign office.

Celebrities such as Jane Fonda and Joaquin Phoenix joined Greenpeace U.S. in mid-May to call on US President Joe Biden to raise his ambitions.

The future of plastics: two scenarios

Modelled short-lived plastic flows in 2040

Business-as-usual



*small particles that resulted from the fragmentation of larger plastic items

Source: UNEP, model data based on OECD and Pew Charitable Trust



Graphic showing two scenarios of modelled short-lived plastic flows.

Fossil fuels

The Paris talks follow an opening round of technical discussions in November in Uruguay and mark the second of five stages of negotiations expected to lead to a historic agreement covering the entire life cycle of plastics.

Host country France plans a political summit on Saturday, with some 40 environment ministers and diplomats, to present recommendations by the EU—one of the world's main consumers of plastic.

Meanwhile, activists have raised fears over the involvement in the process of the plastics industry, even as many professional and scientific observers are unable to attend due to a lack of space.

Around 175 campaign groups signed a Greenpeace letter to UNEP this week to express concern over "the role that the fossil fuel and petrochemical industries and their lobbyists are having on the negotiations".

A spokesperson from the treaty secretariat told AFP that the original UN resolution on the negotiations decided that they "are open for participation of all relevant stakeholders".

They added that a full list of attendees would be provided only after Monday's meeting.

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