

# Scientists flag conflicts of interest ahead of UN plastic and chemical talks

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An international group of 35 scientists is calling out conflicts of interest

plaguing global plastic treaty negotiations and that have interfered with timely action on other health and environmental issues. They urge the implementation of strict guidelines to prevent the same problems from affecting the UN's upcoming Science Policy Panel on chemicals. Their concerns and recommendations are outlined in a [featured paper](#) in the journal *Environmental Science & Technology*.

"From Big Tobacco to Big Oil, powerful industries use the same playbook to manufacture doubt and sow misinformation," said co-author Bethanie Carney Almroth, a Professor at the Department of Biological and Environmental Sciences, University of Gothenburg. "The plastic and [chemical](#) industries already have a long history of deploying these tactics to hamper regulatory efforts. Our health and that of the planet upon which we rely can't afford any further subversion of efforts to reduce the widespread contamination of our air and water."

The group's warning comes as countries prepare to meet next week for the [third UN plastic treaty negotiation session](#) in Nairobi. Though scientists had advised against it, the plastic and petrochemical industries were actively involved in the first round of negotiations in 2022. The paper notes that industry representatives pushed misleading statements, including the debunked claim that plastic production will help fight climate change. To date, no action has been taken to curb these conflicts of interest.

The scientists express concern that similar issues could arise in the development of the UN Science Policy Panel on chemicals, waste, and pollution. The UN Environment Assembly decided in 2022 to establish this Panel to support countries in their efforts to protect human and ecosystem health through scientific assessments. As the working group to create the Panel will meet Dec. 11-15, today's paper is a call to protect its work from undue influence by companies with a vested interest in revenue-generating chemicals.

"Letting polluters have a say in pollution protections is the epitome of the fox guarding the henhouse," said lead author Andreas Schäffer, a Professor at the Institute for Environmental Research, RWTH Aachen University. "Just like the [tobacco industry](#) was restricted from WHO's work on smoking, the UN shouldn't let the [chemical industry](#)'s hired guns dilute global guidelines for chemical and waste management."

The participation of industry in a UN intergovernmental [science](#)-policy body would not be unprecedented. For example, fossil fuel representatives co-authored major reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the Science Policy's Panel analog for climate.

To ensure the effectiveness of the Science Policy Panel, the scientists who co-authored the paper issue the following key recommendations that should be incorporated into the process:

- Define clear and strict conflict of interest provisions.
- Do not confuse the undesirable conflicts of financial or political competing interests with legitimate interests or biases.
- Install regular audits of the Panel's work to check for conflict of interest.
- Secure as many elements of transparency as possible.

**More information:** Andreas Schäffer et al, Conflicts of Interest in the Assessment of Chemicals, Waste, and Pollution, *Environmental Science & Technology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1021/acs.est.3c04213](https://doi.org/10.1021/acs.est.3c04213)

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