

# PLASTICS IS THE FOSSIL FUEL INDUSTRY'S PLAN B. BUT THERE IS NO PLAN B FOR THE REST OF US.

## FOREWORD BY JUDITH ENCK

### Plastic production is the last gasp of the fossil fuel industry.

Made from a combination of chemicals and fossil fuels, plastic produces greenhouse gas emissions at every stage of its life cycle. To provide context, if plastic were a country, it would be the world's fifth largest greenhouse gas emitter, beating out all but China, the U.S., India and Russia<sup>1</sup>.

Yet few policy makers and even fewer businesses are addressing plastic's impact on our rapidly warming climate, and working to limit its ballooning greenhouse gas emissions. Unlike the plastic trash choking our waterways and littering our communities, the plastic industry's devastating impact on our climate is taking place under the radar, with little public scrutiny and even less government accountability.

This report documents the plastic sector's staggering contribution to greenhouse gas emissions in the United States which is now poised to surpass those of coal-fired power plants. **Plastic is the new coal.**

According to Bloomberg Philanthropies and Beyond Coal, 65% of coal plants nationwide have been retired – a remarkable drive toward cleaner energy that has taken decades of hard work by many. But the hard-won reductions in greenhouse gas emissions from coal plants are being quickly cancelled out by a new universe of climate-warming emissions from plastics.

Incredibly, this radical shift in the source of our deepening climate crisis is taking place without notice. Plastic is rarely mentioned

when climate change policies are debated at a state, federal or international level. If we hope to remain within the 1.5 degree C global temperature rise scientists agree is necessary to avoid the worst ravages of climate change, that has to change, and quickly.

According to the International Energy Agency (IEA), petrochemicals will account for more than a third of the growth in world oil demand by 2030, and nearly half of the growth by 2050. The IEA reports "demand for plastics – the key driver for petrochemicals from an energy perspective – has outpaced all other bulk materials (such as steel, aluminum, or cement) nearly doubling since 2000." Further, "After decades of stagnation and decline, the United States has re-emerged as a low-cost location for chemical production, thanks to the shale gas revolution, and is now home to around 40% of the global ethane-based petrochemical production capacity."

However, petrochemical production is not "low-cost" when you consider its greenhouse gas emissions, as well as the intense health and environmental damage caused by petrochemical facilities in places like "Cancer Alley" in Louisiana and parts of Texas and Appalachia. The costs of petrochemical production rise even more when you consider the mounting costs of climate change-fueled disasters in these and other communities across the country.

Plastic's production and disposal are both massive environmental justice issues that are rarely mentioned when climate change policy is debated in Washington or when leaders gather at international forums such as the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26) in Glasgow, Scotland. Plastic production facilities are almost always



Firefighter battling a wildfire. Photo by Fabian Jones via Unsplash.

located in low-income communities and communities of color, as are the landfills and incinerators that serve as the “final resting place” for many plastic products. All of these facilities are highly polluting and take a toll on the health of nearby residents, as well as diminishing property values in their communities.

Nor do the environmental justice impacts of plastics end at our borders. The United States shipped roughly 1.4 billion pounds of plastic trash overseas in 2020<sup>2</sup>, sending the majority to developing countries<sup>3</sup> that lack the local infrastructure and markets to deal with this influx of plastic. As a result, our exported plastic trash is often burned in the open, damaging the health of local communities or discarded in waterways or in open pits thousands of miles away<sup>4</sup>. Not only does America’s “waste colonialism” come with a heavy carbon footprint as a result of shipping trash halfway around the world, it’s also a global extension of the way we treat low-income communities as a dumping ground for pollution.

The burning of fossil fuels has already created what UN Secretary General António Guterres referred to as a “code red for humanity” following the release of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

(IPCC) report in August of 2021<sup>5</sup>.

This summer featured our frightening “new normal” -- a heatwave so extreme that it scorched endangered salmon and killed more than a billion marine animals in the Pacific Northwest<sup>6</sup>, a host of mega-wildfires traversing Western mountain ranges that gutted communities and blanketed the nation in smoke, powerful hurricanes battering the Gulf Coast, deepening historic droughts, massive flooding in the Northeast, and more. Yet if we do not significantly reduce plastic production, the summer of 2021 may well be the least disaster-filled summer of the rest of our lives.

As countries finally begin to eliminate the burning of fossil fuels for power and transportation, the demand for fossil fuels is falling. In desperation, the fossil fuel industry is looking to plastics as a replacement market, as this report details.

Plastics is the fossil fuel industry’s Plan B. But there is no Plan B for the rest of us.

**Judith Enck, President, Beyond Plastics at Bennington College, October 2021**