

Why the UN Still Doesn't Have a Plastics Treaty

by IAN MALLOV /// EAC Volunteer

Sept. 5, 2024, marked world Plastic Overshoot Day – the day each year when global plastic production exceeds our maximum capacity to process plastic waste. By Dec. 31, around 500 million metric tonnes of plastics were added to global stockpiles.

Are we headed for a future of garbage everywhere? Current trends project annual production increasing to **884 million metric tonnes** by 2050. With pollution accumulating in oceans and waterways, up and down food chains and in our bodies, we're trending in that direction. Even when disposed of by the best means available – landfilling, incineration or, **about 9 per cent of the time**, by recycling – processing plastic waste consumes energy, money and land.

What to do besides wringing our hands? The **relative apathy** we seem to have towards this problem is frustrating. And this apathy shows itself in slow political will.

In November 2024, the meeting of the UN International Negotiating Committee (INC) on Plastic Pollution in Busan, South Korea adjourned without agreement. Since 175 nations voted to adopt a legally binding treaty to end plastic pollution in 2022, the INC has met five times. A treaty framework was supposed to be in place in 2024.

The INC discussions have been driven by two groups: the **High Ambition Coalition** (HAC), which is chaired by Norway and Rwanda and includes Canada, wants to restrict plastic production. Another group, led by fossil fuel powerhouses Russia, Iran and Saudi Arabia, wants to focus only on dealing with waste.

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How did we get to this point?

Only in the latter 20th century did plastics begin to truly replace plant- and mineral-derived substances as materials of choice. In 1909, chemist Leo Baekeland patented Bakelite – a hard, mouldable material made from the chemical reaction of two common small molecules, phenol and formaldehyde. Bakelite was the first of the many commercial plastics made from long, chain-like molecules called polymers. In this case, phenol and formaldehyde were the chain links. These long chains, and the specific links you use, give plastics their distinctive properties.

Cheap production of these lightweight, easily customizable materials has allowed a proliferation of manufactured household goods and enabled many technological innovations of the last 75 years. But it's really only in recent decades that the alarm has been raised over waste. The discovery of plastic debris floating in the mid-Pacific by oceanographer Elizabeth Venrick in 1972 may have been the proverbial canary in the coal mine, but few were paying attention. Even Venrick's own paper described the threat of plastics as “chiefly aesthetic.” The materials were thought to be inert: we didn't think there were chemical reactions happening between plastic molecules and other molecules – say, those in the environment or the human body.

We now know that's not the case. An abundance of recent research shows that tiny plastic pieces composed of the long, supposedly inert molecules affect reproductive, respiratory and digestive health. Larger plastics interfere with fragile marine ecosystems.

Because so much plastic pollution is transported by water, plastic waste has an outsized impact on coastal areas. Apart from the destructive impacts on nature, aesthetic concerns are a serious issue for places where beauty and tourism are essential to the economy. Nova Scotians, with our 13,000 kilometres of coastline, know this as well as anyone.

So-called single-use plastics, such as cigarettes, food wrappers, bottles and bottle caps, are deservedly vilified as culprits. Accounting for 31 per cent of plastic production, packaging is the single largest use of plastics by weight. Plastics have also increasingly replaced other materials in construction (17 per cent), auto parts (12 per cent) and consumer products (10 per cent). Recycling rates remain stubbornly low, due to both specific technical challenges compared to metals, glass and paper recycling, and poor infrastructure.

Why a plastics treaty needs to limit production

The disagreement at the heart of the INC meetings is really a disagreement over the first of the Twelve Principles of Green Chemistry, which basically says that it's better to prevent waste than to clean it up. The solution must be to radically reduce plastic



production and consumption, as the HAC group led by Norway and Rwanda advocates. Countries must take a full life cycle approach – meaning, addressing not only the use and disposal of plastics, but also their production.

An intermediate “plutilateral” agreement between around 95 of the 175 INC commitment signatories, to ban the most harmful plastic ingredients and set targets for production and reuse, is a possibility. But this committee has the potential to do a lot more.

What can we do? Realistically, plastic waste is rarely among most people's top five political concerns. It may be less urgent than climate change. However, the common ground this challenge shares with climate change and habitat destruction is that it requires a shift in our habits. We've done it before, shifting away from grocery bags and straws. As a next step, let's tackle the plastic packaging problem. A global plastics treaty significantly reducing production would be a powerful step.

TAKE ACTION

Reduce plastic packaging by bringing your own containers, the BYO idea: usreduces.org/the-case-for-byo. This would be a first step towards putting pressure on producers and politicians to reduce production.

Stay tuned for the date and locale for the next INC meeting on plastic pollution.