

The Last Beach Cleanup



NEWS RELEASE

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NEW REPORT REVEALS THAT U.S. PLASTIC RECYCLING RATE HAS FALLEN TO 5-6%

On the heels of California Attorney General Rob Bonta's April 29, 2022 announcement of a major investigation of the recycling claims made by the petrochemical and fossil fuel industries, plastics policy and engineering experts are out with new numbers that document the low rate of plastics recycling in the United States.

The Last Beach Clean Up and Beyond Plastics released a new report "The Real Truth About the U.S. Plastics Recycling Rate," which documented a recycling rate of 5 to 6% for post-consumer plastic waste in the U.S. for 2021. The groups also revealed that while plastics recycling is on the decline, the per capita generation of plastic waste has increased by 263% since 1980.

The full report is available at: <https://bit.ly/US-plastics-recycling-rate>

"The plastics industry must stop lying to the public about plastics recycling. It does not work, it never will work, and no amount of false advertising will change that. Instead, we need consumer brand companies and governments to adopt policies that reduce the production, usage, and disposal of plastics," said Judith Enck, President of Beyond Plastics and former U.S. E.P.A. Regional Administrator.

The failure of plastic recycling is in contrast to paper which is recycled at 66% (2020 figure per [American Forest and Products Association](#)). High recycling rates of post-consumer paper, cardboard, and metals proves that recycling works to reclaim valuable natural material resources. It is plastic recycling that has always failed as it has never reached 10% even when millions of tons of plastic waste per year were counted as recycled when exported to China.

"There is no circular economy of plastics. Plastics and products companies co-opted the success of other material recycling and America's desire to recycle to create the myth that plastic is recyclable," said Jan Dell, Independent Engineer and Founder of The Last Beach Cleanup.

The truth is that less than 6% of plastic waste is recycled and the other 94% is disposed of in landfills, burned in incinerators, or ends up polluting our ocean, waterways, and landscapes after being used just once, often for mere minutes. The plastic recycling process itself is wasteful, with 30% of collected PET bottle plastic material disposed in the recycling process.

Historically, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has released its updated yearly data on recycling rates on November 15th, National Recycling Day. However, the EPA has not released updated recycling rates since November of 2020 when it published the rates for 2018.

We face an escalating set of intertwined plastic pollution and climate change crises making access to these updated recycling rates critical. To fill this gap, The Last Beach Clean Up and Beyond Plastics examined data from the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, the latest U.S. exports, and the waste industry to document a U.S. plastics recycling rate of 5 to 6% for 2021.

“We call on the U.S. EPA to publicly release these important numbers as soon as possible. Elected officials and the public need this data in order to make informed decisions about the plastic pollution crisis we’re all facing,” said Enck.

Last week, the California Attorney General launched an investigation into the role the petrochemical and fossil fuel industries have played regarding plastic pollution. Attorney General Bonta began by issuing a subpoena to ExxonMobil to determine whether the fossil fuel giant has lied to the public about both the negative effects of plastics and also the efficacy of plastics recycling.

The company promptly responded with yet another lie about plastics, claiming that they are committed to “advanced recycling” technology, a fancy new name for burning plastics that is intended to distract attention from the severity of the crisis and delay the adoption of effective solutions.

The Last Beach Clean Up and Beyond Plastics reject so-called “advanced recycling” or “chemical recycling” – the latest false solution being peddled by the plastics industry – because it is neither viable nor environmentally sound - please see Natural Resources Defense Council’s issue brief: [Recycling Lies: “Chemical Recycling” of Plastic Is Just Greenwashing Incineration](#) for more details. “Chemical recycling doesn’t work on mixed household plastic waste and it doesn’t reduce plastic pollution,” said Dell.

The report shares examples of public policies that have successfully reduced plastic waste and pollution including plastic bag bans, plastic bottled water bans coupled with water filling stations, and reuse systems. Once the truth about plastics recycling is understood, these effective policies are far more likely to be widely adopted.

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