

Plastic Production Caps Needed to Combat Crisis, Say Democrats

By Kellie Lunney | November 22, 2024 4:32PM ET

The US should push hard for a global agreement at an upcoming conference to reduce plastic production and phase-out the most harmful chemicals associated with the material, congressional Democrats told the Biden administration Friday.

The environmental community is worried a final international agreement on plastic pollution expected by year's end won't endorse production caps on plastic or a mandatory elimination of the most problematic types, like single-use items. The Biden administration, led by the State Department and Council on Environmental Quality, has not publicized what it plans to support at the fifth and final UN global conference on ending plastic pollution from Nov. 25 to Dec. 1 in Busan, South Korea.

"We ask you to use U.S. influence to advance an ambitious agreement that includes real, enforceable commitments to reduce plastic production, phase out chemicals of concern and problematic and avoidable uses of plastics across the full life cycle," Sen. [Jeff Merkley](#) (D-Ore.) wrote in a Nov. 22 [letter](#) obtained exclusively by Bloomberg Government. Sens. [Sheldon Whitehouse](#) (R.I.) and [Peter Welch](#) (D-Vt.) as well as Rep. [Jared Huffman](#) (D-Calif.) also signed the letter.

The lawmakers said the latest agreement text from Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee on plastic pollution Chairman Luis Vayas Valdivieso "lacks global targets" for these goals. The Democrats urged the US delegation to help make the final agreement "significantly stronger" to combat the plastic pollution crisis.

Merkley, who led a congressional delegation to Ottawa, Canada, in April for the fourth summit, is headed to Busan.

The US has put itself at the center of negotiations between more and less ambitious member states since the INC sessions began in 2022. INC-5 begins as the two-week global climate conference COP29 wraps in Azerbaijan. [Reuters](#) in August reported that the US was planning to support some form of production caps on plastics—the most contentious aspect of the negotiations—which a State spokesperson confirmed was accurate at the time. But environmental groups in discussion with the White House have indicated that the administration has backed off that stance in the lead up to Busan.

“Cutting back on plastic production must be at the heart of the solution,” said Christy Leavitt, plastics campaign director for advocacy group Oceana. Not endorsing plastic production caps would be “a major step backwards” for the US, said Kathleen Rogers, president of Earthday.org. “We remain deeply concerned that the US may abandon one of the small incremental steps so badly needed in recognizing that plastics remain one of the major health threats facing all people and the planet.”

The US recognizes the urgency of the plastic pollution crisis but also that no easy solutions exist, said State Department Spokesperson Matthew Miller, adding that the effort will require systemic change from the entire globe. The official also said the US wants an effective agreement with meaningful and practical universal obligations on plastic production, consumption, and waste.

The administration remains committed to reductions in global production and consumption of plastic but does not view that ambition as a production cap, said a CEQ spokesperson. The spokesperson added the administration does not support such a cap and that it believes there are different paths to achieving those goals.

‘Bipartisan Priority’

The Biden administration faces a tough path accommodating the views of the plastics industry, environmental advocates, and progressive Democrats on how to reduce waste while recognizing economic and consumer dependency. The outgoing White House also risks putting its imprimatur on an agreement that the incoming Trump administration could ignore. State has said that any accord can’t go beyond existing law in the US, and Republicans will control both Congress and the executive branch in January.

The Plastics Industry Association opposes capping production of plastic, saying it would hurt US manufacturers without truly improving the environment. “Moreover, these types of approaches make it unlikely that the bipartisan support needed in Congress would be secured to approve a final global agreement,” said Matt Seaholm, the group’s president and chief executive officer, in a statement. “Ensuring that the U.S. economy thrives while responsibly using our resources is a bipartisan priority,” Seaholm, who’s attending INC-5, said.

The Environmental Protection Agency this week released a [strategy](#) for preventing and reducing plastic pollution. The White House over the summer announced a governmentwide plan to ban single-use plastics from federal operations by 2035 in a bid to stem the rising tide of plastic waste pollution.

[Biden Seeks Ban on Single-Use Plastic in Federal Government](#)

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