Global Goal and Commitments to End Plastic Pollution

Whereas, for the past 60 years, plastics production and use has dramatically increased, and the vast majority of plastic generated is not recovered at the end of its useful life.[i]

Whereas, due to the lightweight character of many disposable plastics, they easily enter the environment by natural forces, such as wind.

Whereas, plastic is a useful material with myriad applications, but a non-renewable material that requires careful lifecycle management so that it does not degrade land, oceans, human health, and sustainable economies.

Whereas, between 60 and 80% of marine debris is derived from plastic products and enormous quantities of plastic are concentrated in the 5 largest gyres of our oceans, with known serious consequences for marine life and possible grave consequences for the food chain and human health.[ii]

Whereas, UNEP's 2011 Year Book identified ocean plastic pollution as "persistent, bioaccumulating and toxic substances", stating that: "Research indicates that tiny pieces of plastic are absorbing and concentrating from the seawater and sediments chemicals, from polychlorinated biphenols, PCBs, to the pesticide DDT. [...] Many of these pollutants, including PCBs, cause chronic health effects such as endocrine disruption, mutagenicity and carcinogenicity."[iii]

Whereas, Plastic debris causes substantial economic impacts to coastal economies because of the high costs of removal and disposal, but cleaning this waste from watersheds, coastlines, and the nearshore seafloor is critical to prevent flooding, navigational hazards, detriment to the tourism industry, and ecological destruction.[iv]

Whereas, The Honolulu Strategy adopted at the Third Intergovernmental Review Meeting on the Implementation Global Programme of Action for the Protection of the Marine Environment form Land-Based Activities identified a priority goal of "Reduced amount and impact of land-based litter and solid waste introduced into the marine environment," and noted that the Honolulu Strategy is a companion document to global, regional and national processes to address plastic waste source reduction.

Whereas, UNEP has called for use of instruments such as fees, fines, penalties, liability and compensation schemes, subsidies and incentives to address marine plastic pollution, which it describes as "one of the world's most pervasive pollution problems impacting our oceans and waterways." [v]

Whereas, the Scientific and Technical Advisory Panel of the Global Environment Facility and UNEP identified the need for prioritization of solutions that address the root cause of plastic pollution "production and consumption patterns, including the design and marketing of products internationally without appropriate consideration for their environmental persistence or ability to be recycled in the locations where sold."[vi]

Wheareas, more than 100 presidents and prime ministers and thousands of other world leaders will gather in Rio de Janiero Brazil in June 2012 for the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20 Earth Summit) and will be taking action to speed the transition to a green economy and sustainable future.

Whereas, the impacts of plastic pollution and the unsustainable production and consumption patterns that are the underlying causes of this problem must be addressed in the transition to a green economy and sustainable future.

We -- countries, corporations, communities or civil society groups -- hereby commit to contribute to the goal of ending plastic pollution within the next decade.

Specifically, in accordance with the precautionary principle, we will immediately develop, publicize, and support specific time-bound measureable commitments to reduce plastic pollution. Such commitments could include regulatory controls, market incentives, extended producer responsibility policies for single-use plastics, collection and recycling infrastructure, and efforts to change to individual consumption habits, to achieve specific source reduction targets aimed at decreasing the production of plastic materials (especially single-use items) most likely to end up as plastic pollution in our ocean, rivers, and on land.

We further agree to submit these commitments to the Rio+20 compendium (www.uncsd2012.org/rio20/makeacommitment.html), and to be held accountable for their implementation.

Background Information: Global Goal and Commitments to End Plastic Pollution

To solve the global challenge of marine plastic pollution, it is essential to increase focus on reducing the source of plastic pollution by addressing not only plastics disposal infrastructure, but plastics production and consumption. As stated by the Global Environmental Facility Scientific and Technical Advisory Panel (GEF/STAP) "Putting it simply, if we can reduce the quantity of plastic waste we produce while at the same time improving waste management options, we maximize our potential to tackle the problems associated with accumulation of waste products in the environment."[vii] There is no single way to comprehensively reduce plastic pollution; these recommended tools should be applied in combination, and should be prioritized as part of implementation of the Global Programme of Action for the Protection of the Marine Environment from Land-based Activities.

I. "Take Back" programs create extended producer responsibility and reduce the quantity of plastic produced and consumed.

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) defines Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) as an environmental policy approach in which a producer's responsibility, physical and/or financial, for a product is extended to the post-consumer stage of a

product's life cycle.[viii] GEF/STAP notes that "EPR may be well suited to some developing nations, because it helps redistribute the burden of handling end-of-life plastic from governments and individuals who may be impacted by the waste, to producers whose interests would then be aligned with those of the region."[ix]

One of the primary functions of EPR is to transfer the financial and physical responsibility of waste management from local government and taxpayers to the producer. Another important function is to provide incentives to producers to incorporate environmental considerations into the design of their products. Together, these functions prevent and reduce waste, increase the use of recycled materials in production, and increase resource efficiency. GEF/STAP notes that "EPR allows for design flexibility—bounded by clear performance standards—so innovative companies rather than those that push costs off onto regional governments can succeed in the marketplace, and programs can be tailored to the governance, capacity, and institutional realities of any given nation."[x]

Extended Producer Responsibility regulations for packaging, which include plastics, are in place or being developed in, Canada, throughout Europe, in Uruguay, Brazil, Argentina, and Mexico.

II. Legal and regulatory controls are needed to control individual sources that are very difficult to recycle or "take back" (e.g. single use bag fee/bans).

Laws to ban or place fees on single-use plastic items, such as plastic bags, beverage bottles and foam food containers, address the increasing volume of specific plastics and their persistence in the marine environment. Around the world, laws have been enacted to place fees on, or ban single-use plastics. For example, plastic bag control laws are in place in Australia, China, Ireland, Italy, Rwanda, Philippines, Wales, and in various communities throughout the United States.[xi]

III. Increase reusable, renewable, recycled-content, and recyclable alternatives to plastics, especially single-use plastics.

Plastics production worldwide is increasing, and half of all plastic items are designed to be used once and then thrown away.[xii] Even where modest gains in recycling occurs, increased production surpasses waste diversion.[xiii] Individual consumers can reduce the amount of packaging they consume, choose recyclable, recycled content, and/or compostable packaging, and seek alternatives to fossil fuel-derived plastics – especially reusable materials. If reusable items are not available as a first option, government, business, and institutional vendors should also choose renewable, recycled-content, and/or recyclable alternatives whenever possible, and all plastics should be properly reused or disposed.

Photo Credits: "Claire Fackler, NOAA National Marine Sanctuaries/Marine Photobank."; 5 Gyres Institute; "Marine Photobank from (c) 1990 Bob Talbot, LegaSea Project".

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