

'Enough is enough': California Subpoenas ExxonMobil Over Plastic Pollution

By [Elizabeth Claire Alberts](#)

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California Attorney General Rob Bonta has announced that his department will be undertaking a first-of-its-kind investigation to determine the role that the fossil fuel and petrochemical industries have played in the escalating global plastics crisis. The California Department of Justice is narrowing down on one company in particular: ExxonMobil, a corporation that's previously been pegged as being the [greatest polluter of single-use plastics](#) in the world.

"In California and across the globe, we are seeing the catastrophic results of the fossil fuel industry's decades-long campaign of deception," Bonta said in a [statement](#) on April 28. "Plastic pollution is seeping into our waterways, poisoning our environment, and blighting our landscapes. Enough is enough."

Bonta said the plastics industry has engaged in an "aggressive campaign to deceive the public" that has sustained "a myth that recycling can solve the plastics crisis." Data [compiled](#) by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) shows that recycling in the U.S. has never surpassed 9%.

The California DOJ issued a subpoena to ExxonMobil to seek information about whether the corporation has deceived the public about the harmful effects of plastic and the difficulties of recycling plastic products, and if it has violated any laws in doing so.

ExxonMobil denied these allegations in a statement.

"We share society's concerns and are collaborating with governments, including the State of California, communities and other industries to support projects around the world to improve waste management and circularity," Julie L. King, a spokesperson for the company, said in the statement. "We are the first company to deploy commercial-scale advanced recycling technology at a major petrochemical facility. This technology converts a broad range of used plastic to raw materials that can be utilized to make

new plastic.”



ExxonMobil has previously been pegged as being the greatest polluter of single-use plastics in the world. Image by Tom Fisk via [Pexels](#).

Internal documents have revealed that leading oil and gas corporations in the U.S. have known about the unfeasibility of recycling plastics since the 1970s, according to a recent [report](#). Yet these same companies have heralded the recycling capacities of plastics for decades, experts say.

An [analysis](#) by the Minderoo Foundation in Australia revealed that ExxonMobil contributed 5.9 million metric tons to global plastic waste, making the company the largest producer of single-use plastics. The report also found that about 100 companies, including ExxonMobil, were responsible for 90% of global production of single-use plastics.

Environmental experts have welcomed the California DOJ’s investigation, saying it’s time for the fossil fuel and petrochemical industries to be held accountable for their contributions to the plastics crisis.

“I view this as a very significant investigation which has the potential to finally hold plastic producers accountable for the immense environmental damage caused by plastics,” said Judith Enck, president of Beyond Plastics who previously served as a regional administrator for the EPA. “It will also address the ongoing deception of claiming that plastics are recyclable when, in fact, less than 10% are actually recycled. I applaud California Attorney General Rob Bonta for taking this bold action.”

In October 2021, Beyond Plastics released a [report](#) that said the plastics industry was set to [overtake coal](#) by 2030 in terms of carbon emissions in the U.S., and that plastic was not only

a waste issue, but that plastic production was exacerbating the climate crisis. The report found that plastics production in the U.S. currently generates about 232 million metric tons of greenhouse gases every year, equivalent to about 116.5 gigawatts of coal plants. As production continues to increase, so will the amount of carbon emissions, the study says.

Now that the world is shifting toward renewable energy sources, fossil fuel and petrochemical companies appear to be refocusing their efforts to plastics production, recently [investing \\$208 billion](#) to expand the global production of plastics.

Carroll Muffett, president of the Center for International Environmental Law (CIEL), said it was “reasonable and appropriate” to investigate whether ExxonMobil misled the public when considering the “mountains of evidence” that such corporations have long deceived the public about the role their products have played in the climate crisis.

“The harms and costs confronting the State and people of California are significant, but they’re not unique,” Mufett said. “From frontline and fenceline communities harmed by plastic production and incineration, to people facing plastics on their shorelines and croplands, in their food and water supplies, and in their bodies, the impacts of plastic are diverse, widespread, and accelerating. So, while California’s action is the first of its kind, it is unlikely to be the last.”

Research [suggests](#) that about 450 million metric tons of plastic are produced every year, and that this is set to double by 2045. Much of this plastic ends up in the environment, polluting both aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems. Plastic has been found in the [deepest parts of the ocean](#) to some of the [highest mountains](#). It’s [found](#) in drinking water, food, and even the air we breathe. In short, plastic is everywhere.

A [report](#) published by WWF suggests that each of us consumes about a credit card’s worth of plastic every single week

A growing number of studies show that plastic can be detrimental to human health, although its impacts are still being fully investigated. One [study](#) found microplastic — particles smaller than 5 millimeters, or three-sixteenths of an inch — [present in human fetuses](#). Another piece of [research](#) found that microplastics were present in human blood.



Microplastics in the Chesapeake Bay watershed, U.S. One study found microplastic — particles smaller than 5 millimeters, or three-sixteenths of an inch — present in human fetuses. Another piece of research found that microplastics were present in human blood. Image by Will Parson/Chesapeake Bay Program via [Flickr](#) (CC BY-NC 2.0).

Plastic has become ubiquitous in our world — but it's only one of about 350,000 different kinds of artificial chemicals, or "[novel entities](#)," circulating in our world. This has led researchers to say in a recent [study](#) that we have [breached a "planetary boundary"](#) for chemical pollution, pushing humanity down a dangerous, irrevocable path.

In March this year, 175 countries agreed to [adopt a global plastics treaty](#) to curb plastic production and disposal, but the details of this agreement have yet to be determined. A group of scientists recently published a letter in [Science](#), arguing that the treaty must place a cap on the production of new plastics in order to properly address the issue.

"For too long, ExxonMobil and other corporate polluters have been allowed to mislead the public and harm people and the planet," said Graham Forbes, plastics global campaign lead at Greenpeace USA. "The science has become crystal clear that we must move away from fossil fuels and throwaway plastic. It is encouraging to see the state of California stand up to the fossil fuel industry. Hopefully, this is a sign that policymakers are ready to start holding corporations accountable."

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Elizabeth Claire Alberts is a staff writer for Mongabay. Follow her on Twitter [@ECAAlberts](#).

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Featured image: People protest against ExxonMobil in Melbourne, Australia. Image by Matt Hrkac via [Flickr](https://www.flickr.com/photos/mhrkac/) (CC BY 2.0).

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