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Plastic Is Just as Destructive to the Climate as Oil and Gas

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The phenomenon of climate change invokes images of black smoke billowing out of smokestacks, emissions from exhaust pipes on an endless highway of bumper-to-bumper traffic, or the insect-like cranes of hydraulic fracturing (fracking) and drilling operations dotting the landscape. We do not view our plastic shopping bags as part of the climate crisis — but we should. And just as the thirst for fossil fuel energy is an ugly symptom of runaway capitalism, so is plastic production and use. Both arise from the same problematic system, and both contribute to the same existential crisis humanity faces.

Plastic pervades every aspect of our modern lives. From the keys that I tap on my laptop as I write this piece to the lid on my coffee shop latté, the packaging of the individually wrapped cookies on the countertop, and even the lenses on my sunglasses. While we may worry about the *pollution* that plastic — especially the disposable variety — creates in clogging our landfills, choking our marine life, entering our food chain and disrupting our endocrine systems, we are likely not considering the role of plastic production and disposal on climate change. There is indeed a direct link between the devastating tornadoes in the Midwest this week and the 128 billion plastic bottles that Coca-Cola churns out every year.

Manufacturers churn out 448 million tons of plastic a year, a large part of which is disposable, intended for packaging products. Perhaps we imagine the containers holding our fresh organic berries or the sturdy bubble-wrapped packages our Amazon orders are delivered in are easily transformed into new packaging once we toss them into our recycling bins. But only about 10% of all plastic waste in the U.S. is ever recycled, and now that percentage has likely dropped even more. Malaysia announced this week it will be sending back hundreds of tons of plastic waste to their countries of origin — including the U.S., United Kingdom and Australia. Malaysia's move comes a year after China decided to stop accepting plastic waste for recycling and is the latest in a disturbing trend of a world filling up with unwanted plastic at the same time that manufacturers are ramping up production.

Carroll Muffett, president and CEO of the Center for International Environmental Law (CIEL), explained to me in an interview that "plastics are simply fossil fuels in another form. Ninety-nine percent of what goes into plastics are oil, gas and, to a lesser extent, coal feed stocks." As a result, "the processes that produce plastics begin at wellheads and at frac pads across the United States and around the world." According to Muffett, every step in the production of the plastic we casually use and toss away has an impact on the climate, from the emissions released during extractive processes like fracking to the transporting of the raw materials to plants and beyond. Because ever fewer plastics are getting recycled, many communities across the globe are also burning their plastic trash as fuel, adding more emissions into our already saturated atmosphere. And the plastic that is not recycled or

incinerated itself emits potent greenhouse gases like methane and ethylene, as a 2018 study has alarmingly shown.

CIEL recently published a report called Plastic & Climate: The Hidden Costs of a Plastic Planet, which found, among other things, that "the production and incineration of plastic will produce more than 850 million metric tons of greenhouse gases — equal to the emissions from 189 500-megawatt coal power plants."

In spite of these alarming statistics, Muffett says that "the infrastructure for making new plastics is growing incredibly rapidly." Instead of ramping down plastic production and use, the fossil fuel industry is accelerating its growth. The International Energy Agency (IEA) found last year that petrochemicals, the raw materials from which everyday plastics are created, "are becoming the largest drivers of global oil demand, in front of cars, planes and trucks." Calling it a "blind spot" of the global energy system, the IEA found petrochemicals "account for more than a third of the growth in world oil demand to 2030, and nearly half the growth to 2050, adding nearly 7 million barrels of oil a day by then."

Muffett pointed out,

> "As global recognition of the need to transition away from fossil fuels for energy and transportation increases, the oil and gas companies — who are also not coincidentally the same companies that make plastics such as Exxon, Chevron, Shell, Total — those companies are increasingly relying on petrochemicals and plastics to make their long-term business models add up."

In other words, the fossil fuel companies are repackaging the same climate-change-causing product in a different form and selling it to us in the hope that we won't notice how little difference there is between the two.

A perverse aspect of the industry is the vast extent to which taxpayers subsidize fossil fuel corporations. Earlier this year, the International Monetary Fund estimated fossil fuel subsidies globally add up to $5.2 trillion a year, with the U.S. second only to China in scale. As Muffett noted wryly, "We as a society are being forced to subsidize our own destruction."

If we begin to see plastic production and use as part of the fossil fuel industry's deadly means of turning profits, we may be able to tackle head on the drive to ramp up production. The climate crisis is deeply linked to the plastics crisis. There is a massive supply of oil and gas in our economy, and fossil fuel companies want to make the most of their easily available raw materials in spite of the destructive nature of the products.

Alongside our demand to transition to a new, clean, green economy has to be a call to dramatically cut the production and use of plastics. According to Muffett, the single-use disposable plastic packaging of the kind that most of our products come wrapped in are "actually the major driver for the build-out of new plastic infrastructure." And although plastics producers like to assert they are simply responding to consumer demand, Muffett says that research has shown that "plastics, to a far greater extent than virtually any other product, is actually a matter of supply driving demand."

CIEL's report on plastics calls for an end to the production and use of single-use, disposable plastic and the curtailing of new oil, gas and petrochemical infrastructure. As oil and gas

companies build out new processing plants to transition from producing fuel to producing plastic, that infrastructure needs to be stopped in its tracks. As many in the climate justice movements have done, rather than just calling for a transition to renewable energy sources, the way forward is a rallying cry to leave all fossil fuels in the ground.

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