

# Corporate Insistence On Single-Use Plastics & Protecting The Environment

January 31st, 2019 by Carolyn Fortuna

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Corporations all over the world need to make a choice — are they going to commit to a future in which reliance on fossil fuel-based plastics is only a memory? Or are they going to continue to contribute to the 300 million tons of plastics produced every year, half of which is for single use? Loud investments in R&D to investigate future alternatives to plastics is a weak starting point, more public relations than practical reform. Our planet depends on corporations eliminating single-use plastics from all packaging — now.

## Understanding the Complexity of Plastics

Yes, many of us have adopted circular consumer approaches. We've given up plastic bags. We skip straws, pass up plastic bottles, avoid plastic packaging, recycle, and don't litter.

But are corporations really doing what they can to reduce plastics?

Nodding to consumer environmental concerns but perpetuating harmful practices is becoming the corporate norm. Last year, only 5 Fortune 500 Global companies made biodiversity commitments that could be considered specific, measurable, and time-bound. The main source of synthetic plastics is crude oil. Coal and natural gas are also used to produce plastics. Petrol, paraffin, lubricating oils, and high petroleum gases are bi-products produced during the refining of crude oil.

We are now producing nearly 300 million tons of plastic every year, half of which is for single use, and just producing plastic uses huge resources – it takes around 12 million barrels of oil to make the 100 billion plastic bags used annually in the US alone.

## Inspiration isn't the Same as Ending Single-Use Plastics

They could agree to switching from plastic packaging to glass, biodegradables, brown paper, compostables, or other alternatives. Instead, a coalition of fossil fuel companies and a consumer goods company have united to launch Alliance to End Plastic Waste (AEPW). Snappy title, right? Who wouldn't want to see plastic waste come to an end? Yet public relations endeavors like AEPW and others are little more than superficial gestures to protect corporations' ability to produce cheap single-use plastics. And that's not a good thing, considering the cleantech options that are coming onto the market.



The AEPW group, which includes Exxon, Dow, Total, Shell, Chevron Phillips, and Procter & Gamble, says it will commit \$1.5 billion toward keeping plastics out of the environment. They're broadcasting this initiative on a slick website with seagulls floating by against a background of puffy clouds — a video that includes a youthful voiceover, children who collect plastic refuse, and visions to “dream, build, and help our cities.”

It would be inspirational if it were not for the origin of the plastics problem and the reality that these companies recognize that their dependence on single-use plastics is one of the biggest environmental issues we confront. It's critical that they stop PR subterfuge and step up to solving the problem.



Greenpeace Global Plastics Project Leader Graham Forbes says the AEPW announcement is a “desperate” attempt from corporate polluters to maintain the status quo on plastics. While people all over the world are voicing concerns about and rejecting single-use plastics in their own lives, companies like Procter & Gamble churn them out on a daily basis, “urging the industry to invest in refill and reuse systems.”

This is a failed approach that is little more than complicity with fossil fuel giants like Exxon, Shell, Dow, and Total. “Make no mistake about it: plastics are a lifeline for the dying fossil fuel industry.” No longer can we allow corporations like P&G to ensure that their profits keep rolling in. We will never escape this plastic pollution crisis through better recycling and waste management efforts — only 9% of the plastics ever made have actually been recycled. We must call out corporations who use recycling as a crutch to continue production of cheap plastics.

The AEPW companies are the ones who are producing, distributing, and failing to be held accountable for plastics. The missing element in their flashy presentations is that a much more environmentally sound decision must be made: to eliminate single-use plastic production — period. Other corporations and countries are doing so.

## Europe Waves Goodbye to Single-Use Plastics

Europe isn't so hesitant in its decision-making to turn away from reliance on plastics. In January, 2019, EU member states confirmed a provisional agreement

to introduce **restrictions on a number of single-use plastic products**. In 2021 European citizens will say goodbye to the following single-use plastic products:

- plastic cutlery (forks, knives, spoons and chopsticks)
- plastic plates
- plastic straws
- food containers made of expanded polystyrene, such as fast food boxes, with or without a lid, used to contain foods for immediate consumption on the spot or for take-out, and which can be consumed without any further preparation that requires cooking, cooking or heating
- beverage containers made of expanded polystyrene
- glasses made of expanded polystyrene
- oxodegradable plastic products (this term refers to plastic materials that contain additives that, under aerobic conditions, encourage microfragmentation of plastic due to its oxidation). This type of plastic contributes to the contamination by microplastics in the environment, is not compostable and negatively affects the recycling of conventional plastic
- cotton swabs made of plastic

The European Commission's decision to eliminate single-use plastics is a result of recent estimates on marine litter, which are now seen as making up **85%** of beach litter and causing catastrophic consequences on the environment.



## Looking for Ways to Be Eco-Friendly? Stop Distributing Single-Use Plastics!

KFC, part of Yum! Brands Inc., has announced that it is committing to eliminating non-recoverable or non-reusable plastic packaging by 2025. It will partner with suppliers and franchisees to identify plastic alternatives for straws, plastic bags, cutlery, and lids, all the while looking at its current system to find ways to be more eco-friendly.

But as Conrad MacKerron, senior vice president of *As You Sow*, said about the KFC plastic pledge, it's little more than "a weak step." Making materials recoverable, not recyclable, "leaves a giant loophole that some of these materials will be incinerated or converted to fuels, which is not part of a circular economy approach."

*As You Sow* has launched an international coalition of investors to engage publicly traded consumer goods companies on the threat posed by plastic waste and pollution. Twenty-five institutional investors from 4 countries with a combined \$1 trillion of assets under management have signed a declaration on plastic pollution, citing plastic pollution as a clear corporate brand risk and pledging to

interact with leading companies to find solutions through new corporate commitments, programs, and policies.

## **Final Thoughts**

Plastics are made from non-renewable resources such as crude oil, gas, and coal. Single-use plastics take anywhere from 20 to 1,000 years to break down, wreak havoc on the environment, and harm animals. More single-use plastics are sent to landfills than are ever recycled, with millions also ending up polluting the land and water. As awareness about the many problems with plastic has spread, bans on single-use plastics are being put into place by companies, cities, and even whole countries. It's time for each of us to take action to persuade corporations to end their reliance on single-use plastics.

The video that follows helps to fill in our gaps of understanding about the devastating effects of single-use plastics on the marine environment.