

Huffman, Merkley Introduce Bold Legislation to Take on the Growing Plastic Pollution Crisis

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Last week, U.S. Representative Jared Huffman (D-CA-02) teamed up with Oregon’s U.S. Senator Jeff Merkley to introduce the bicameral Break Free from Plastic Pollution Act—the most comprehensive plan ever introduced in Congress to address the plastic pollution crisis that is poisoning our air, water, and land, and disproportionately impacting communities of color and low-income Americans.

The legislation would reduce plastic production, establish ambitious recycling targets, and protect frontline and fenceline communities from the health and environmental burdens of toxic emissions from the plastics industry through reducing production and by changing the incentives of the industry. The bill would shift the burden of cleanup to the corporations that produce the plastics so they have financial motivation to end the burning and dumping; establish a nationwide deposit return system to address beverage container waste; support reusable and refillable systems; and strengthen environmental justice protections by including the Protecting Communities from Plastics Act.

“Plastic pollution isn’t just a problem for our oceans and climate – it’s a massive environmental injustice. Communities are overburdened with plastics’ toxic air and water emissions and the false promises of so-called chemical recycling,” said Rep. Huffman. “Worse, Big Oil is aggressively promoting even more plastic – it’s how they plan to keep us addicted to planet-killing fossil fuels even as we transition to a clean energy future. We can’t let this happen. Our bill tackles the plastic pollution crisis head on, addressing the harmful climate and environmental justice impacts of this growing fossil fuel sector and moving our economy away from its overreliance on single use plastic. We must start putting people and communities over these corporations’ greed.”

“Plastic pollution is a public health crisis that can only be solved with bold actions,” said Sen. Merkley. “Additionally, plastics produce greenhouse gas emissions and release toxins throughout their entire life span, and its frontline communities who are disproportionately exposed to the dangers from plastic production. And downstream plastics are creating a massive pollutions problem for our rivers and oceans. The Break Free from Plastic Pollution Act is the boldest legislation yet to address this crisis with the seriousness it deserves.”

Many steps to tackle the plastic pollution crisis are already widely popular with the American people. Public polling shows that two-thirds of Americans believe that businesses that produce or use plastics in their products should pay for collecting, sorting, and recycling plastics; 86% of Americans support requiring new plastic to contain at least some recycled material; and four-in-five Americans support phasing out certain non-recyclable plastics altogether.

In recognition of Americans’ growing concerns about plastic consumption and waste management, the Break Free from Plastic Pollution Act would provide national leadership with tools and a path forward to reduce the amount of wasteful plastic produced and reform our broken waste and recycling systems. The bill would shift the burden of cleanup and waste management to where it belongs— on the corporations that produce this waste—by:

- Requiring big corporations to take responsibility for their pollution.
- Establishing aggressive source reduction targets for single-use plastic products and beverage containers.
- Creating a nationwide beverage container refund program, which has been successful in 10 states.
- Reducing and banning certain single-use plastic products that are not recyclable.
- Establishing grant programs to support reusable and refillable products.
- Pressing pause on new plastic facilities until critical environment justice and health protections are put in place.

This year’s legislation is strengthened by including: new mandates for performance targets, including reducing single-use plastics and requiring all single-use beverage containers and packaging to be reusable, recyclable or compostable; stronger language for the elimination of toxic substances in beverage containers

and robust requirements for incorporating post-consumer recycled content into beverage containers; stronger language for prohibiting the use of toxic substances; and strengthened environmental justice requirements for facilities, including community consultation and more stringent fence-line monitoring requirements.

“Plastics are made of fossil fuels combined with PFAS, phthalates, heavy metals and other toxic chemicals. They are produced in some of the nation’s most overburdened and underserved communities, blanketing neighborhoods in carcinogenic air pollution. Many plastics are used for mere minutes, but their impact can leave a mark for centuries to come. Plastics are piling up in our landfills and oceans, incinerators are turning waste plastics into toxic air pollutants, and consumer products are leaching chemicals into our bodies. Microplastics are found in the air we breathe, the food we eat, and the water we drink. They have been found deep in human lungs and in the bodies of newborn babies. By restricting the most problematic single-use plastic products, investing in reuse and refill systems, and insisting on robust protections for frontline communities, the Break Free from Plastic Pollution Act seeks to protect people at every stage of the plastics supply chain and to set this country on a healthier and more sustainable path forward. We applaud its reintroduction and thank Senator Merkley and Representative Huffman for their leadership on this issue,” said Dominique Browning, Director and Co-Founder, Moms Clean Air Force.

“Plastic pollution is petrochemical pollution and it’s hurting families right here in the United States,” said Heather McTeer Toney, Executive Director of Beyond Petrochemicals.

The Break Free from Plastic Pollution Act is endorsed by nearly 100 groups.

The legislation is cosponsored by U.S. Senators Richard Blumenthal (D-CT), Cory Booker (D-NJ), Dick Durbin (D-IL), Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY), Edward J. Markey (D-MA), Patty Murray (D-WA), Bernie Sanders (I-VT), Chris Van Hollen (D-MD), Elizabeth Warren (D-MA), Peter Welch (D-VT), Ron Wyden (D-OR); and by many representatives.

Nanette Barragán (CA-44), Jamaal Bowman (NY-16), Salud Carbajal (CA-24), Andre Carson (IN-07), Judy Chu (CA-28), Yvette Clarke (NY-09), Emanuel Cleaver (MO-05), Steve Cohen (TN-09), Gerry Connolly (VA-11), Mark DeSaulnier (CA-10), Lois Frankel (FL-22), Jimmy Gomez (CA-34), Raúl Grijalva (AZ-07), Val Hoyle (OR-04), Pramila Jayapal (WA-07), Hank Johnson (GA-04), Ro Khanna (CA-17), Barbara Lee (CA-12), Mike Levin (CA-49), Ted Lieu (CA-36), Stephen Lynch (MA-08), Jennifer McClellan (VA-04), Betty McCollum (MN-04), Jim McGovern (MA-02), Grace Meng (NY-06), Joe Morelle (NY-25), Kevin Mullin (CA-15), Jerry Nadler (NY-12), Eleanor Holmes Norton (DC-01), Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (NY-14), Donald M. Payne Jr. (NJ-10), Chellie Pingree (ME-01), Katie Porter (CA-47), Ayanna Pressley (MA-07), Mike Quigley (IL-05), Jamie Raskin (MD-08), John Sarbanes (MD-03), Jan Schakowsky (IL-09), Adam Schiff (CA-30), Bobby Scott (VA-03), Brad Sherman (CA-32), Shri Thanedar (MI-13), Jill Tokuda (HI-02), David Trone (MD-06), and Frederica Wilson (FL-24).