

EPA's Novel Superfund Study Aids Advocates' Push For Safer Plastics

EPA's decision to launch a first-time Superfund assessment into the potential impacts to wildlife from exposure to post-consumer plastics could aid environmentalists' push for the chemical industry to produce less toxic forms of the ubiquitous substance and for policymakers to limit flows of the waste into the massive "Great Pacific Garbage Patch."

"There's not a lot of science about plastics pollution," says a source with the Center for Biological Diversity (CBD), the group that successfully petitioned EPA to consider using Superfund authorities to remediate marine plastic pollution that litters a small Hawaiian island.

The agency earlier this month told CBD that it will examine the potential toxicity from ingesting plastic fragments in the marine environment to help determine whether to list Tern Island on Superfund's National Priorities List (NPL).

EPA Region IX Administrator Jared Blumenfeld says in a Nov. 14 letter to CBD that the focus of the assessment "will be on the potential toxicity threats posed by microplastics." The letter is available on InsideEPA.com. (Doc ID: 2453451)

An EPA Region IX spokesman acknowledges the uniqueness of the assessment in examining plastic marine debris, but says it is "hard to say what this will mean in the bigger picture" beyond this site.

The just-launched preliminary assessment (PA) by EPA Region IX marks the first time the agency has considered using Superfund to respond to an area contaminated with post-consumer plastics, CBD says in a press release.

EPA's decision responds to a petition from CBD last December, which urged the agency to add Tern Island, along with the rest of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands chain, as well as a nearby,

large swirling mass of plastic debris known as the "Great Pacific Garbage Patch," to the NPL. Such a move would set a precedent deeming so-called user plastics hazardous and requiring cleanup.

While ocean areas and sites containing waste from plastics factories have previously been placed on the NPL, sites with consumer plastics pollution have not.

Such plastics are materials contained in common commercial goods such as plastic bags, bottle caps and clothing, CBD said in the petition, arguing that they have contaminated the Pacific, which they claim qualifies as a waste "release" that warrants listing the site on the NPL.

This is "the first time that plastic-infested waters of the United States have been nominated for a Superfund designation," CBD said in a press release when it submitted the petition last Dec. 11.

While the group argues that plastic wastes in the Northern Hawaiian Islands are particularly harmful to wildlife there, a CBD source says the group hopes this effort will marshal more data about the hazards of plastic pollution on wildlife and potentially humans, and that eventually this data might prompt companies to research and produce less toxic alternatives or that it could “lead to stricter regulations regarding plastic disposal.”

And CBD Attorney Emily Jeffers said in the Nov. 18 press release that the group also hopes that “what [EPA] learns from this investigation will lead to cleanup of the islands -- and ultimately to policies that reduce the flow of garbage into our oceans.”

The plastics division of the American Chemistry Council, a chemical industry association, in a statement to Inside EPA said, “[W]hile we agree that solutions to marine litter are needed and are being pursued, we have serious reservations with this approach.” ACC, however, declined to comment in detail on the matter.