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Environmentalists Demand Stricter Pollution Standards For Plastics Industry

SAN FRANCISCO (CN) – Seeking stricter accountability for the plastics industry, more than 350 public interest groups filed a petition with the Environmental Protection Agency Tuesday demanding higher standards and lower emissions for plastics manufacturers.

"Plastics production is poisoning our communities, choking our oceans and exacerbating the climate crisis," said Lauren Packard, an attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity.

Packard spoke outside the EPA's regional office in downtown San Francisco before the group walked inside to deliver a petition signed by 364 conservation and community organizations.

The petition asks the EPA to list facilities that produce chemicals used in plastics manufacturing – such as ethylene, propylene, polypropylene – as sources of emissions subject to regulation. That would open the door for the EPA to create new emissions standards for those plants.

It also demands such facilities be powered by 100% renewable energy and that new air pollution and technology standards be adopted to reduce the emission of planet-warming gases and air toxins.

The EPA has three years to respond to the petition.

According to Packard and other advocates, "cheap fracked gas" is driving the push to build more plastic production facilities in the U.S. Oil and natural gas can be refined to create chemicals that serve as the building blocks and ingredients in plastic products. The plastics industry has invested more than \$200 billion for 333 new or expanded facilities since 2010, according to the American Chemistry Council, which represents plastics manufacturers.

"The glut of fracked gas is fueling a plastics boom at a time when the climate crisis demands that we put an end to fracking and stop overproducing polluting plastics," said Mark Schlosberg, political director with Food & Water Action. "The EPA needs to step up and do its job by regulating these toxic chemicals that pollute the air and contribute to the climate crisis."

Critics say emissions from petrochemical plants and plastic production facilities are most harmful to low-income communities where such facilities are typically located.

Filmmaker and plastics expert Stiv Wilson, who joined Packard and others in front of the EPA's San Francisco office Tuesday, noted that residents of a Houston neighborhood surrounded by chemical plants suffer from higher rates of cancer, asthma and other health problems. The Union of Concerned Scientists, an environmental nonprofit, found in 2016 that residents of the Harrisburg-Manchester neighborhood were at least 24 times as likely to develop cancer compared to residents in "the wealthier and predominantly white west Houston communities."

Stiv made the film, "The Story of Plastic," featuring scenes from across the globe of plastic garbage, "mountains of trash," rivers clogged with plastic debris and skies "choked with" air toxins from plastic production facilities and recycling plants.

Global production of plastic is expected to increase by 33% to 36% by 2025, according to a 2017 study by the Center for International Environmental Law.

Packard said most new plastic being produced is for one-time use, or "throwaway plastic," which often ends up in waterways, buried underground or is burned and releases harmful pollutants into the air.

"There is no safe way to dispose of plastic," she said.

Beyond the infamous "garbage patch" of coagulated plastic waste floating in the Pacific ocean, plastic rubbish has also washed up on coastal beaches and remote islands and has been found in the bellies of sea turtles and marine birds.

On Saturday, the Scottish Marine Animal Strandings Scheme, which investigates stranded animals, found a dead sperm whale on a Scottish island with 220 pounds of trash lodged in its stomach. Fishing nets, bundles of rope, plastic cups, plastic bags and other garbage were found inside the whale.

A 2016 study by the World Economic Forum concluded there will be more plastic than fish in the world's oceans by the year 2050.

Aside from asking the EPA to set higher standards for petrochemical plants, environmentalists are pursuing other strategies to help curb plastic pollution in the U.S.

In June, the U.S. House of Representatives passed an amendment that would block a \$1.9 billion loan guarantee for the Appalachian Storage Hub, a key part of a massive petrochemical project in Ohio, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia, which critics say will increase fracking and plastics production in the region. Schlosberg said his group pushed for that legislation, which still requires approval by the U.S. Senate.

Fellow conservationist Jennifer Krill of the Berkeley-based nonprofit EarthWorks said her group is also supporting the "Last Chance Alliance" campaign, which is asking Governor Gavin Newsom to end fracking in California and require oil and gas wells and petrochemical plants to not be operated within 2,500 feet of places where people live, work or go to school.

"It's to get people out of harm's way," Krill said.

A spokesperson for the American Chemistry Council, which represents the plastic industry, did not immediately respond to a request for comment Tuesday. The group's vice president of plastics, Steve Russell, said in a 2018 statement that the industry is "committed to being part of the solution" in combating plastic pollution.

He said the industry group's members set aggressive goals of making 100% of plastics packaging recyclable or recoverable by 2030 and ensuring all plastic packaging is re-used, recycled or recovered by 2040.

"We know ocean pollution is a large and complex problem. But this problem is solvable if we work together and stay focused on capturing and transforming municipal solid waste at its source," Russell said.