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Opinion: Don't fall for smoke and mirrors, recycling won't solve our plastics problem

Jenny Tompkins Your Turn

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As world leaders work on the first treaty to end plastic pollution, Erie seems to be on a different planet. The U.S. changed its position on the United Nations' first global plastics treaty in August by supporting limits on plastic production. However, in Erie, city leaders are, in my view, still promoting "greenwashed" solutions to our plastic pollution problem. Erie, its workers, and its business owners deserve recognition of this global challenge and should be directly involved in finding away to address this issue before it's too late, instead of being misled by a messaging campaign.

Plastic pollution is everywhere — in marine and freshwater, drinking water, air, food, and throughout our bodies. We've all seen graphic videos of sea turtles or birds impacted by plastic entanglement and their suffering when they ingest plastics. What is not as well-known is the association between plastic found in human bodies and health conditions such as heart attacks, strokes, lung cancer, and decreased reproductivity.

Plastic pollution is found everywhere because so much plastic is produced. Globally, nearly 460 million metric tons of plastic are manufactured annually, which is 190 times more than in 1950. Compounding the problem is that half of this plastic produced is intended for single use. Alarmingly, plastic production is projected to triple by 2050.

Plastic production is an increasingly large source of greenhouse gas emissions, threatening efforts to mitigate climate change. If the plastics industry was considered a country, it would be the world's fifth-highest emitter. Here's the kicker: plastic pollutes our air and water at every stage of its production cycle, subjecting us and our environment to thousands of toxic chemicals and rapidly increasing planet-warming emissions.

The oil and gas industry's need for a lifeline drives the increase in plastic production. Here in Pennsylvania and the Appalachian Region, the industry's overzealous drilling triggered an overabundance of gas, and cracking that gas into ethane to create plastics became one of the industry's strategies to salvage their own exploitation. As climate action promises more renewable energy and electrification, fossil fuel companies are instead ramping up plastic production to stay relevant. They're also lobbying against efforts to address climate change and plastic pollution.

Erie's position in the fracked gas and plastics buildout is tied to manufacturing and academia. Erie produces both essential plastics for the medical, automotive, and technology sectors and single-use plastics, though this distinction is rarely made. Penn State Behrend's relevance as a satellite campus is bolstered by its plastics engineering technology program.

Recycling technically fraught

Chances are, many people reading this believe the three arrow symbol on plastic containers signifies "recyclable." Nope. That is a holdover from the original greenwashing by the industry back in the 1980s.

Investigative reporting by NPR and the Center for Climate Integrity revealed documents showing the fossil fuel industry has known for 40 years that plastics recycling would never be effective at scale. Due to thousands of chemical additives and colorants in plastics and their varied chemical structures, recycling is technically fraught. Just last month, the California Attorney General filed a lawsuit against ExxonMobil "for engaging in a decades-long campaign of deception" on plastic recyclability.

Today, the U.S. only recycles about 5% of plastic annually, and recycled material is unlikely to contribute more than 10% to 12% of future plastic production. Massive funding to boost plastic recycling continues to aim at appeasing the public's concern about litter and preventing passage of plastic reduction legislation. We see the same rinse-and-repeat misleading promises that recycling is THE solution to our plastics problem.

After 40 years of false promises about plastic recycling, Erie seems to still be falling for the smoke and mirrors. Erie's leaders are touting International Recycling Group's (IRG) pledge to "revolutionize plastics recycling" in Erie. IRG's business model, which relies on a consistent demand for waste, creates a financial disincentive to curb single-use plastic production, as I see it. The only research seemingly referenced to back up claims about the purported climate

benefits of this business model is from Penn State Behrend, whose chancellor reportedly sits on IRG's board.

Members of over 100 environmental and community groups, including PennFuture, signed a letter opposing the U.S. Department of Energy's recent decision to use federal climate funds for a \$182 million conditional loan guarantee to IRG. The loan would follow initial investment by Erie Insurance, and support IRG's proposed Erie plant and a partnership with an unnamed steel mill in northwest Indiana set to burn flaked plastic as a substitute for coke in blast furnaces.

Penn State also recently celebrated a \$1 million partnership with Shell, our "shockingly bad neighbor," focused on "energy and sustainability." After receiving the largest subsidy in Pennsylvania history, Shell has racked up over 27 notices of environmental violations, over \$12 million in fines, multiple lawsuits, and charges by the Pennsylvania Attorney General for violating the Pennsylvania Clean Streams Law since opening in late 2022. Under the partnership, Behrend faculty will "analyze the current state of polymer recycling in Pennsylvania." In this way, I believe Erie is supporting Shell's greenwashed head fake as the global company tries to counter bad press about its numerous environmental violations.

This summer, Behrend also received a \$100,000 grant focused on microplastics in Lake Erie from the American Chemistry Council, the largest plastics trade group in the U.S. Behrend's press release states, "We aren't picking a side of the discussion of 'Are plastics bad for the environment?'" I believe this messaging is unacceptable when 175 countries are negotiating a global treaty to address our plastic pollution crisis.

Erie leaders held no open public hearings or meetings related to the aforementioned projects and partnerships. The Erie community is entitled to be engaged and ask critical questions about decisions impacting our health, environment, and manufacturing legacy.

What Erie could do instead

How could Erie's decision-makers demonstrate leadership in addressing plastic pollution? Acknowledge, in alignment with the global community, that plastic pollution causes real and rapidly increasing environmental harms. Publicly back efforts to curb production of single-use plastic and regulate thousands of chemicals of concern used in plastics. The U.S. Break Free From Plastic Pollution Act and the U.S.'s Global Plastics Treaty stance are key examples.

Eliminate subsidies to fossil fuel companies that contribute to an overabundance of fracked gas and virgin plastic. Craft a phased transition from single-use plastic production. Boost efforts to assist businesses in preventing the escape of pellets and microplastics throughout the plastic production supply chain, including during transport. None of these would prevent Erie from showcasing pride in our manufacturing workforce and production of essential plastics like vehicle components and medical supplies.

A small group of people, behind closed doors, are making decisions for the whole of Erie to perpetuate the production of fracked gas and single-use plastic, in my view. They're hoping the public will not connect the dots. For too long, Erie ignored the harms of Erie Coke. We cannot let the history of hometown exploitation play out once again, this time by ignoring the global efforts to address plastic overproduction and pollution. Now is the time to move past the old trope of "the mistake on the lake" and toward a cleaner and healthier future for all.

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