Issue Brief

PLASTIC POLLUTION MYTH VS FACT

ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH

This sheet debunks some common myths about plastic pollution. These myths come from talking points by an industry lobbyist at a state legislative hearing. If you hear another myth that should be debunked, contact Gabrielle Houston, gabrielle@ncelenviro.org

MYTH **MYTH:** Most plastic pollution comes from rapidly developing countries in Asia.

FACT **FACT:** Developed countries, including the US, have historically sent massive amounts of plastic to Asia instead of handling it themselves. Forty five percent of the world's plastics collected for recycling have been exported to China since 1992. As of 2018, China has stopped accepting plastic waste. This waste now ends up in landfills, gets incinerated, or is sent to other countries lacking the infrastructure to manage it.

MYTH **MYTH:** Pollution from single-use plastic and plastic bags can be reduced through more recycling.

FACT **FACT:** While plastic bags might technically be recyclable, fewer than 1% of plastic bags are recycled. Many states have found that plastic bags consistently get caught in recycling machinery. This has led processing companies to charge towns if there are too many plastic bags mixed in with recyclable materials like glass and paper. Additionally, there is no market for dirty plastic bags and they are very difficult to recycle.

MYTH **MYTH:** If we recycle more, we will solve the problem of plastic pollution.

FACT **FACT:** Despite education, technology advances, and infrastructure improvements, global plastic recycling remains around 9%. Much of the single-use plastic we have cannot truly be recycled, but rather is downcycled into different products of lower quality. Since most plastic is either sent to a landfill or downcycled, recycling does not eliminate the issue of new plastic being created which continues the need for more plastic production.

MYTH **MYTH:** Food benefits from being wrapped in plastic.

FACT **FACT:** Many plastic food wrappers contain harmful chemicals, such as phthalates, BPAs, and other carcinogens, that are bad for human health. There is no evidence that food wrapped in plastics helps to reduce food waste. Studies have found that as plastic packing has increased so has the growth of food waste.

MYTH **MYTH:** Alternatives to plastics come with higher costs such as greater greenhouse-gas emissions and more replacement litter.

FACT **FACT:** While plastic is not the only pollutant in our environment, it is one of the most persistent. Plastic was designed to be durable and as a result, takes thousands of years to breakdown, creating microplastics in the process. The entire lifecycle of plastics produces a large amount of greenhouse gases, from production to end of life.

MYTH **MYTH:** Styrofoam is lightweight, contains little plastic, is mostly air, and uses less energy and water than comparable paper-based alternatives.

FACT **FACT:** Polystyrene (commonly known as styrofoam) is a petroleum-based plastic. While the production of styrofoam is less energy intensive compared to paper, the full life cycle of styrofoam has a greater environmental impact. The material is difficult to recycle and results in plastic pollution that can take over a million years in a landfill or decades in a marine environment to decompose, compared to paper-based cups which can take days up to 20 years. As polystyrene degrades, it breaks down into smaller and smaller pieces that animals often mistake for food. Styrene also increases the risk of leukemia and lymphoma and is a neurotoxin. It contains toxins that leach out into food and drinks, especially when heated.

NCEL
National Caucus of Environmental Legislators

202.744.1006 • www.ncelenviro.org • 1100 H St NW, Suite 600 • Washington, DC 20005