

September 19, 2023

The Honorable Antony Blinken  
U.S. Department of State  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20500

The Honorable Brenda Mallory  
Council on Environmental Quality  
730 Jackson Place NW  
Washington, DC 20506

The Honorable Arati Prabhakar  
Office of Science and Technology Policy  
1650 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20502

Dear Secretary Blinken, Chair Mallory, and Director Prabhakar,

Thank you for your commitment to our common goal of ending plastic pollution to protect both the environment and human health. Numerous authoritative, peer-reviewed scientific reports and the United Nations Environment Assembly Resolution 5/14<sup>1</sup> have underscored the significant scientific consensus regarding the detrimental impact of plastic pollution on human health and the right to a healthy environment and reinforced the need for urgency in addressing plastic pollution.<sup>2</sup> It is with that consensus and urgency in mind that we write to you today.

This correspondence serves in part as a follow-up to a meeting in May 2023, convened alongside the second meeting of the International Negotiating Committee to develop an international legally binding instrument on plastic pollution, including in the marine environment (INC-2), in Paris, France. Several U.S. members of the International Science Council (ISC) met with Acting Assistant Secretary of State Jennifer R. Littlejohn of the Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs. At this meeting, we discussed the opportunity and necessity of U.S. leadership to leverage the best available science to reduce plastic pollution at

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<sup>1</sup>United Nations Environmental Programme. UNEA Resolution 5/14 entitled “End plastic pollution: Towards an international legally binding instrument. 2022.

[https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/39812/OEWG\\_PP\\_1\\_INF\\_1\\_UNEA%20resolution.pdf](https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/39812/OEWG_PP_1_INF_1_UNEA%20resolution.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> See The Minderoo-Monaco Commission on Plastics and Human Health. *Annals of Global Health*. 2023; 89(1): 23, 1–215. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/aogh.4056>. (“2023 MMC Report”); See The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2022. *Reckoning with the U.S. Role in Global Ocean Plastic Waste*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/26132>. (“2022 NASEM Plastic Committee Report”)

the global and national levels. We identified a few potential directions for U.S. leadership in the context of the negotiations. The suggestions we shared included:

- (1) Establishing a regular U.S. government-wide engagement mechanism with the U.S. external research community (a “science-policy interface”), beginning with INC-3;
- (2) Advocating with the Secretariat and United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) for inclusion of independent scientists in the INC process (including UNEP funding for those lacking resources); and
- (3) Asserting a strong voice in the negotiations for independent science-based input on key negotiation topics for which delegates are making important decisions for the text.

Since that meeting, we have expanded our dialogue to include other eminent members of the U.S. scientific community, and our views and suggestions are presented below. The undersigned are from a variety of scientific expert groups and a range of organizations. We include U.S.-based members of the ISC, experts who have participated in reports and convenings of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM), authors of leading peer-reviewed papers and reports, representatives of other science organizations or laboratories with special expertise, including data analytics and modeling. Only a fraction of us have been fortunate to have a voice with members of the U.S. delegation or at the INC discussions.

We appreciate the Administration’s statements in meetings and on non-governmental organization (NGO) stakeholder calls that they are committed to ensuring the global agreement is based on and incorporates the best available science. We have also noted the strong commitment of the White House to advancing science-based and equitable solutions in domestic strategy development and expressions of interest on the part of leading federal science agencies (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Department of Energy, and National Science Foundation) to establish a mechanism for exploring science-based policy options, the proposed NASEM Plastic Roundtable.

UNEP has stressed the need to strengthen the science-policy interface at all levels, and the United Nations Environment Assembly Resolution 5/14 that created the INC process specifically decided to consider the best available science, traditional knowledge, knowledge of Indigenous peoples, and local knowledge systems in the deliberations. Engagement of science and knowledge is critically important for decision-makers to understand the problem and its implications, formulate evidence-based Treaty provisions, and ensure effective and timely implementation.

The United States has historically been a leading voice on science, including in major successful negotiations such as the Montreal Protocol. The United States proved instrumental in ratifying the treaty in 1988, galvanizing global allies to follow the leadership of President Reagan. Since

then, the U.S. has sanctioned all five subsequent amendments to the treaty, spurring investment and successful development of alternative technologies to protect the ozone layer, many of them by American companies. In the United States alone, the phase-out of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) and halons is estimated to have avoided 433 million cases of skin cancer, 63 million cases of cataracts, and protected 2.3 million Americans from deaths related to skin cancer, between the years 1980 and 2100. Due to the strong stance of the United States, a near-complete recovery of the ozone layer is expected by the end of this century. We advocate that the same can happen in the case of problematic plastics, spurring innovation to alternative solutions and protecting oceans, land, and human health.

Given the fast-moving nature of plastic pollution science and policy, as well as impending U.S. policy formulation on domestic and treaty decisions, the time is ripe for the United States to assert visible science leadership, both domestically and with other science-forward delegations at the INC. Indeed, U.S. leadership is warranted because many of the top experts on plastic pollution and safe materials innovation are located within the United States, working outside of government, and could be significant advisors to the nation. The recent release of the “zero draft” of the text offers another important opportunity for Administration leadership to engage with the broader U.S. scientific community.

Federal agency scientists and industry-supported scientists who are already deeply engaged will be critical to devising workable solutions. However, the participation of independent scientists is essential to ensure strong, defensible outcomes through a rigorous process. This would require a formal setting for leading scientists to share data and perspectives with U.S. policymakers so that the delegation may make informed decisions in regard to the global treaty. While some scientists have been able to participate in the broader U.S. NGO stakeholder engagement meetings, these calls have been time-limited and have not always left room for all voices to be heard.

Hosting a separate forum for scientists to provide evidence-driven insights would be beneficial for all. These include, but are not limited to, source reduction targets and timetables; human health protective criteria for production, design, and management; identification of problematic chemicals and criteria; and aligned definitions and standards. We believe this engagement is critically important in delegate decisions on treaty provisions and proposed solutions or mitigation options – including substitutes or waste management. Scientific engagement on these topics should be part of domestic policy development, as well.

Since our May meeting, many of our organizations have submitted written comments both to the U.S. government and to the INC that emphasize the need for a defined science engagement process for the United States as well as in the INC process. We would be happy to share the recommendations with you or your staff before INC-3 in Nairobi, Kenya.

We look forward to discussing how we can move this critical relationship forward, based not only on the discussion in Paris but also on current and future public submissions by the U.S. science community.

We appreciate your support and willingness to engage with the scientific community on these very important matters.

Sincerely,

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