

## *Op-Ed: More than 90% of U.S. plastic waste is never recycled. Here's how we can change that*



*Seagulls flock to plastic waste and other trash near the mouth of the Los Angeles River in 2015. (Los Angeles Times)*

By Tom Udall and Alan Lowenthal Feb. 21, 2020 3:01 AM

More than [a third of Americans](#) recycle every day. They want to believe that the plastic bottles, containers and packaging they use will be turned into new products — instead of being sent to landfills and incinerators or polluting our planet.

But that belief is an illusion. [Eight of the 10](#) most commonly polluted plastic items, which includes utensils and food wrappers, are not recyclable in America's municipal recycling system. Over 90% of U.S. plastic waste is [never recycled](#). And so every year, about [32 million tons](#) of plastic are landfilled or incinerated. That doesn't count the amount that directly litters our environment or that we ship to developing countries to handle.

The reality is that we cannot recycle our way out of this crisis using the system we have in place. The heart of the problem lies in the simple fact that big corporations are producing plastic such as packaging, bags and foam that end up being unrecyclable. Once these plastic products are used, no businesses want to buy the scraps to recycle them. They end up as eternal plastic waste instead.

To address the crisis of plastic pollution, we must think beyond a system that allows major companies to profit from creating ever-more unnecessary plastic waste while relying on local taxpayers and beach-combing volunteers to collect and pick up waste in public spaces. We must dispel the industry-promoted

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myth that litterbug consumers are responsible for the crisis — and that we can simply double down on our current recycling system to dig our way out.

In Congress, we represent the people of New Mexico and California's 47th District, which is centered in Long Beach. Our constituents are suffering under the same plastic pollution crisis that is overwhelming our planet. California's coastlines and New Mexico's landscapes are riddled with plastic trash. Scientists have found microplastics contaminating rainwater in the [highest reaches of the Rocky Mountains](#) and in the [deepest trenches of the oceans](#).

We recently introduced in Congress the [first comprehensive bill](#) to confront the plastic pollution crisis head-on. Our legislation benefited from the input of more than 200 environmental advocates, industry leaders, local government officials and others on how to structure a sustainable future based on a reusable economy and make recycling more successful.

Our bill attacks the crisis at its source and charts what we believe is an achievable path toward a plastic pollution-free planet.

The plastic-producing industry's dirty secret is that companies manufacture products that appear to be recyclable — then turn around and create new plastic, instead of trying to reuse the products they've already produced. It's just more profitable that way.

But this approach costs the rest of us far too much. It also costs the planet too much: Endless plastic production is now a leading contributor to greenhouse gas emissions, worsening climate change.

Our legislation would make the product producers take responsibility for the inevitable waste, requiring them to design, manage and finance waste and recycling programs. The bill would ensure companies can't outsource their waste burdens to local communities and developing countries that can't handle it.

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If companies are responsible for their waste, they will have an incentive to design more sustainable products. That's in contrast to our current system, where local governments spend billions of taxpayer dollars each year to collect products designed to become waste because it is too hard to recycle them.

Our legislation would phase out the most harmful plastic items that aren't recyclable — such as bags, utensils and foam food and drinkware — while setting a standard that requires companies to create more new products from old ones.

The bill's nationwide bottle deposit system — providing 10 cents per beverage container returned — would encourage consumers to return beverage containers after using them. Similar policies in states such as Oregon and Michigan have led to the recycling of nearly 90% of single-use beverage containers. On the national level, that would translate to millions of plastic containers returned and reprocessed into new products instead of polluting our environment.

The recycling status quo is unsustainable. Even when they are broken down, plastic particles can remain in the environment and the food chain forever. We've seen the images of dying birds and marine life with [stomachs full of plastic](#). They aren't alone. Research show that we each consume about a [credit card's worth of plastic every week](#).

That's why we are working for real change. Americans are fed up with seeing plastic bottles and empty take-out containers in our gutters, on our beaches and in our oceans. Meanwhile, plastic is on its way to becoming a leading driver of climate change — the current rate of plastic production will produce more than [1.3 gigatons of greenhouse gas a year](#) by 2030, the equivalent to the pollution from almost 300 additional coal-fired power plants.

But we can break free from plastic pollution. And we must, for those who will live on our planet long after we are gone.