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Climate Forward

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The plastic problem

Plastic is truly ubiquitous. It's in our clothes, our phones, our sunscreen. But also, increasingly, in marine food chains and [immense, floating garbage patches](#) in the oceans.

How do we fix this? Nations are trying to come up with an answer, and this year will be critical. Negotiations, which started [last year](#) and are scheduled to continue through 2023, will shape a plastics treaty expected [by the end of 2024](#).

The talks will have to square two contrasting views of plastic: It's a technological marvel that made a host of goods widely accessible and [revolutionized medicine](#), but also a major contributor to climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution.

Rising consumption worldwide means the plastic waste that's going into waterways is set to more than double, and perhaps more than triple, by 2040. Environmentalists fear production will only increase as the world quits oil and gas and fossil fuel companies pivot to plastic to sustain their profits.

Here's what's at stake.

How badly do we need plastics?

While it's true that plastic is a key component in some very important things, such as medical devices, [research shows](#) that more than 40 percent of the plastic we use is packaging and generally single-use.

"Plastics are pervasive," said Carroll Muffett, who heads the Center for International Environmental Law and has been following the treaty negotiations closely. "But it's not the same as saying they're truly essential."

After all, most of you probably remember a time when soda bottles were refillable and made of glass. Going back to that system alone would have a [huge impact](#).

Still, changing our ways will be incredibly hard. Grocery shopping used to be plastic-free. But without meaningful change in policy, Muffett said, getting back to that will most likely be very difficult. A reporter for NPR recently proved it when she [tried to avoid plastics at the grocery store](#) for just a week.

Why is plastic harmful?

Plastic has a role in both the climate and the biodiversity crises.

It's responsible for 3.4 percent of greenhouse gas emissions, mostly because the majority of them are produced with [fossil fuels](#). It's [killing marine life](#) as it enters food chains or entangles animals. Plastic particles can be found in soil, water, air and also [us](#). Some fear plastic is also interfering with the ability of the oceans to [capture carbon](#).

“If you ask me what the potential impacts of the global plastic crisis are, we are just beginning to understand that,” Muffett told me.

A lot of plastic is also made from toxic chemicals, which make it not only harmful to us and life in general, but a lot harder to recycle. Improving this will be one of the treaty's [key goals](#).

What are the issues dividing nations?

Muffett explained that there are basically two sides in the negotiations.

Fifty nations have joined the [High Ambition Coalition to End Plastic Pollution](#), which is pushing for a treaty that will limit production of plastic with binding targets for every nation that signs the pact.

Other countries, including fossil fuel-producing nations like Saudi Arabia and the United States, want a global agreement that focuses on recycling and is built on [voluntary commitments](#), according to Climate Home News.

Advocates, like Muffett, generally prefer the first version.

First, because, so far, recycling [hasn't proven effective](#) at the scale necessary.

Second, environmental treaties that limit production have historically been more successful. One example is the Montreal Protocol, which limited the production of chemicals that harm the ozone layer.