

## 'They lied': plastics producers deceived public about recycling, report reveals

**Companies knew for decades recycling was not viable but promoted it regardless, Center for Climate Integrity study finds**



📷 The report says big companies may have broken laws designed to protect the public from misleading marketing and pollution. Photograph: Clemens Bilan/EPA

Plastic producers have known for more than 30 years that recycling is not an economically or technically feasible plastic waste management solution. That has not stopped them from promoting it, according to a new report.

"The companies lied," said Richard Wiles, president of fossil-fuel accountability advocacy group the Center for Climate Integrity (CCI), which published the report. "It's time to hold them accountable for the damage they've caused."

Plastic, which is made from oil and gas, is notoriously difficult to recycle. Doing so requires meticulous sorting, since most of the thousands of chemically distinct varieties of plastic cannot be recycled together. That renders an already pricey process even more expensive. Another challenge: the material degrades each time it is reused, meaning it can generally only be reused once or twice.

The industry has known for decades about these existential challenges, but obscured that information in its marketing campaigns, [the report shows](#).

The research draws on previous [investigations](#) as well as newly revealed internal documents illustrating the extent of this decades-long campaign.

Industry insiders over the past several decades have variously referred to plastic recycling as "uneconomical", said it "cannot be considered a permanent solid waste solution", and said it "cannot go on indefinitely", the revelations show.

The authors say the evidence demonstrates that oil and petrochemical companies, as well as their trade associations, may have broken laws designed to protect the public from misleading marketing and pollution.

### Single-use plastics

In the 1950s, plastic producers came up with an idea to ensure a continually growing market for their products: disposability.

"They knew if they focused on single-use [plastics] people would buy and buy and buy," said Davis Allen, investigative researcher at the CCI and the report's lead author.

At a 1956 industry conference, the Society of the Plastics Industry, a trade group, told producers to focus on "low cost, big volume" and "expendability" and to aim for materials to end up "in the garbage wagon".

The Society of Plastics is [now](#) known as the Plastics Industry Association. "As is typical, instead of working together towards actual solutions to address plastic waste, groups like CCI choose to level political attacks instead of constructive solutions," Matt Seaholm, president and CEO of the trade group, said in an emailed response to the report.

Over the following decades, the industry told the public that plastics can easily be tossed into landfills or burned in garbage incinerators. But in the 1980s, as municipalities began considering bans on grocery bags and other plastic products, the industry began promoting a new solution: recycling.

### Recycling campaigns

The industry has long known that plastics recycling is not economically or practically viable, the report shows. An internal 1986 report from the trade association the Vinyl Institute noted that "recycling cannot be considered a permanent solid waste solution [to plastics], as it merely prolongs the time until an item is disposed of".

In 1989, the founding director of the Vinyl Institute told attendees of a trade conference: "Recycling cannot go on indefinitely, and does not solve the solid waste problem."

Despite this knowledge, the Society of the Plastics Industry established the Plastics Recycling Foundation in 1984, bringing together petrochemical companies and bottlers, and launched a campaign focused on the sector's [commitment](#) to recycling.

In 1988, the trade group rolled out the "chasing arrows" - the widely recognized symbol for recyclable plastic - and began using it on packaging. Experts have long said the symbol is highly misleading, and recently federal regulators have [echoed](#) their concerns.

The Society of the Plastics Industry also established a plastics recycling research center at Rutgers University in New Jersey in 1985, one year after state lawmakers passed a mandatory recycling law. In 1988, industry group the Council for Solid [Waste](#) Solutions set up a recycling pilot project in St Paul, Minnesota, where the city council had just voted to ban the plastic polystyrene, or styrofoam.

And in the early 1990s, another industry group ran ads in Ladies' Home Journal proclaiming: "A bottle can come back as a bottle, over and over again."

All the while, behind closed doors, industry leaders maintained that recycling was not a real solution.

In 1994, a representative of Eastman Chemical spoke at an industry conference about the need for proper plastic recycling infrastructure. "While some day this may be a reality," he said, "it is more likely that we will wake up and realize that we are not going to recycle our way out of the solid waste issue." That same year, an Exxon employee told staffers at the American Plastics Council: "We are committed to the activities [of plastics recycling], but not committed to the results."

"It's clearly fraud they're engaged in," said Wiles.

The report does not allege that the companies broke specific laws. But Alyssa Juhl, report co-author and attorney, said she suspects they violated public-nuisance, racketeering and consumer-fraud protections.

The industry's misconduct continues today, the report alleges. Over the past several years, industry lobbying groups have [promoted](#) so-called chemical recycling, which [breaks plastic polymers down](#) into tiny molecules in order to make new plastics, synthetic fuels and other products. But the process creates pollution and is even more energy intensive than traditional plastic recycling.

The plastics sector has long known chemical recycling is also not a true solution to plastic waste, the report says. In a 1994 trade meeting, Exxon Chemical vice-president Irwin Levowitz called one common form of chemical recycling a "fundamentally uneconomical process". And in 2003, a longtime trade consultant criticized the industry for promoting chemical recycling, calling it "another example of how non-science got into the minds of industry and environmental activists alike".

"This is just another example, a new version, of the deception we saw before," said Allen.

Seaholm, of the Plastics Industry Association, said the report "was created by an activist, anti-recycling organization and disregards the incredible investments in recycling technologies made by our industry.

"Unfortunately, they use outdated information and false claims to continue to mislead the public about recycling," he added. He did not expand on which claims were outdated or false.

### Legal ramifications

The report comes as the plastic industry and recycling are facing growing public scrutiny. Two years ago, California's attorney general, Rob Bonta, publicly launched an [investigation](#) into fossil fuel and petrochemical producers "for their role in causing and exacerbating the global plastics pollution crisis".

A toxic train derailment in East Palestine, Ohio, last February also catalyzed a movement demanding a ban on vinyl chloride, a carcinogen used to make plastic. Last month, the EPA announced a health review of the chemical - the first step toward a [potential ban](#).

In 2023, New York state also filed a lawsuit against PepsiCo, saying its single-use plastics violate public nuisance laws, and that the company misled consumers about the effectiveness of recycling.

The public is also increasingly concerned about the climate impact of plastic production and disposal, which account for [3.4% of all global greenhouse-gas emissions](#). In recent years, two dozen cities and states have [sued the oil industry](#) for covering up the dangers of the climate crisis. Similarly taking the oil and petrochemical industries to court for "knowingly deceiving" the public, said Wiles, could force them to change their business models.

"I think the first step in solving the problem is holding the companies accountable," he said.

Judith Enck, a former regional administrator for the Environmental Protection Agency and founder of the advocacy group Beyond Plastics, called the analysis "very solid".

"The report should be read by every attorney general in the nation and the Federal Trade Commission," she said.

Brian Frosh, the former attorney general for the state of Maryland, said the report includes the kind of evidence he would not normally expect to see until a lawsuit has already gone through a process of discovery.

"If I were attorney general, based on what I read in CCI's report, I'd feel comfortable pressing for an investigation and a lawsuit," he said.

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