

BACK TO BASICS

Where are microplastics in the Global Plastics Treaty negotiations?

- **Microplastic sources.** Two main categories of microplastic pollution exist: (i) microplastics that enter into the environment in microplastic form, such as mismanaged pellets, plastic-coated fertilisers, releases at plastic recycling plants and microbeads in personal care products and industrial abrasives; and (ii) microplastics that result from the degradation of larger plastic products during use and after disposal, such as textile fibres, tyre dust, marine coatings, road markings and floating marine plastic debris. Each source requires its own specific strategies and approaches to reduce emissions.
- **Marine microplastic pollution.** Microplastics enter the marine environment in multiple ways, with about 70-80 per cent transported there by rivers. It is estimated that more than [170 trillion plastic particles](#) are in the world's oceans, a number that continues to grow. Even if the entry of plastic debris into the marine environment was halted today, the abundance of microplastics is expected to increase due to the [continuous degradation of plastic debris](#) already present in the world's oceans. The proliferation of marine microplastics could have dire implications for global systems, triggering multiple marine microplastic tipping points with irreversible impacts on [marine organisms](#) (eg, phytoplankton, cetaceans), the [ocean carbon sink function](#) (eg, biological carbon pump, sea-air gas exchange), [coral reefs](#), [ocean deoxygenation](#), [sea ice](#) and the [food web](#), among others. In short, marine microplastic pollution requires monitoring and mitigation similar to greenhouse gases for the climate system or ozone-depleting substances for the ozone layer.
- **Public health.** Microplastics are a major pollutant of concern, entering the human body through food, water and air, found in organs such as the lungs, blood and brain and raising concerns about inflammation, immune dysfunction and increased risks of cardiovascular and neurodegenerative diseases. Moreover, the chemical compounds within them pose additional threats to human health.

ROLLING BACK PROGRESS

- **From UNEA-1 to UNEA-4.** From the beginning, microplastics were a central focus in the resolutions that preceded UNEA-5, with multiple strongly worded references highlighting the need for action:
 - [Resolution 1/6: Marine plastic debris and microplastics \(2014\)](#)
 - [Resolution 2/11: Marine plastic litter and microplastics \(2016\)](#)
 - [Resolution 3/7: Marine litter and microplastics \(2017\)](#)
 - [Resolution 4/6: Marine plastic litter and microplastics \(2019\)](#)

Microplastics were also included in the mandate to the ad hoc open-ended expert group (AHOEEG), which met between UNEA-3 and UNEA-4 and UNEA-4 and UNEA-5, featuring prominently. This body of work served as the backdrop against which [Resolution 5/14](#) was developed.

- UNEA-5. In [Resolution 5/14](#), UNEA explicitly recognises that “plastic pollution includes microplastics” and recalls the previous resolutions on the subject, “noting with concern the specific impacts of plastic pollution on the marine environment.” It thereafter convenes the INC to develop an instrument on “plastic pollution, including in the marine environment” with provisions promoting “national and international cooperative measures to reduce plastic pollution in the marine environment.” At INC-3, the [Zero Draft \(Nairobi\)](#) contained 34 references to microplastics in various measures and provisions, yet was whittled down to only three cursory references in the [latest Chair's Text \(Geneva\)](#) at INC-5.2.

- **Negotiation blinders.** Over the course of negotiations, microplastics have been progressively erased from serious consideration.
 - *Scope.* An important source of microplastic pollution is pellets, which are mismanaged across the value chain, and their inclusion in the treaty text implies the lifecycle of plastics – the scope of the treaty – includes production. It has therefore come under attack. The [Zero Draft \(Nairobi\)](#) included a specific obligation to “prevent and eliminate emissions and releases of plastic pellets, flakes and powder from production, storage, handling and transport,” which was maintained in the [Chair’s Text \(Busan\)](#) at the end of INC-5.1 as “take measures to prevent, reduce, and, where possible, eliminate ... releases and leakages of plastic pellets, flakes and powders to the environment and aquatic systems.” At INC-5.2, the [latest Chair’s Text \(Geneva\)](#) removed any reference to pellets in an apparent effort to appease the no-production-in-scope crowd.
 - *Unrepresentative.* Moreover, the successive iterations of the Chair’s Texts progressively water down references to microplastics in another apparent effort to appease the political resistance of the same few voices calling for explicit deletion, thereby marginalising the voices of the many. The narrower text sits uneasily with the interventions made by numerous delegations throughout the negotiations, which recognise the transboundary harm and call for measures.
 - *Inadequacy.* In the end, the references to microplastics in the latest [Chair’s Text \(Geneva\)](#) consist of: (i) one reference to “intentionally added microplastics” in plastic products (Article 4) and; (ii) two cursory references (“including microplastics”) in product design (Article 5) and releases and leakages (Article 6). Taken together, these provide an inadequate framework for microplastics.

COURSE CORRECTION

- **Head-scratcher.** Microplastics should be meaningfully brought back into the treaty with provisions to monitor, report, research and mitigate via a start-and-strengthen approach. Based on [science already available](#), the failure to set out a specific vision and approach for microplastics within the treaty would leave everyone scratching their heads at the omission before the ink even dries.
- **Microplastics article.** In the light of the above, negotiators could consider adopting a dedicated article on microplastics which sets out the framework for addressing them, with the following key elements:
 - **obligation.** Each party shall take measures to:
 - report losses, releases and leakages of microplastics into the environment
 - ban intentionally added microplastics in products
 - reduce and, where possible, eliminate losses of pellets, flakes and powders during production, storage, transportation and handling through best practices
 - reduce, and where possible, eliminate releases and leakages of microplastics during use and after disposal of plastic products through sectoral plans.
 - **cooperation.** Parties shall cooperate to:
 - monitor and assess microplastic pollution, including in the marine environment
 - promote research on the impacts of microplastics on human health and the environment.
 - **implementation.** The Conference of the Parties shall, at its first meeting, adopt guidance for monitoring microplastic pollution and establish the format, timing and methodologies for reporting losses, releases and leakages. The Conference of the Parties shall, at its second meeting, establish a schedule of work to develop guidelines for best practices and sectoral plans.
 - **review.** The Conference of the Parties shall, every five years, following scientific and technical assessment by a subsidiary body, review progress in the implementation of this Article and, as appropriate, propose additional measures.