

## **United States Submission for the Ad Hoc Open Ended Expert Group on Marine Litter and Microplastics**

The United States reaffirms its support for addressing marine debris both globally and domestically. Different regions and countries face unique capacity challenges that need varying solutions. The United States was pleased to engage closely and constructively in the UNEA-3 discussions to craft a resolution that would approach the problem holistically and consider the challenges to this issue.

To achieve the Resolution's mandate and address the marine litter problem, the Ad Hoc Open Ended Expert Group (AHOEEG) should follow the mandate explicitly as it is written in paragraph 10(d) of the UNEA-3 Resolution – namely to identify the range of response options at the national, regional, and international level, the associated cost and benefit of each response option, and each's feasibility. All aspects of the marine litter and microplastics issue should be considered when addressing this problem. Further, the United States is of the view that waste management (e.g. waste minimization, environmentally sound management of waste, identification of sources and waste leakage points, etc.) is one of the greatest issues and consequently deserves increased attention.

In order to understand the complexities of the marine litter problem, the United States suggests the first AHOEEG meeting be focused on presentations from expert speakers on interdisciplinary topics that relate to marine litter. If decided at the AHOEEG's first meeting that further interdisciplinary analysis is needed, then informal correspondence groups could be tasked to interessionally undertake analysis/evaluation of the barriers and range of solutions to each that could be further discussed at the second meeting.

Accordingly, the United States is submitting views, rather than a position, that offers a structure more closely aligned with the Resolution. Thus, the first meeting should be a focused discussion on challenges and resources, and identifying gaps specific to member states that could include: an assessment of sea and land based sources of marine debris, waste management infrastructure, etc. The discussion should then move forward to explore potential actions on a national, regional and/or global level.

The discussion could be structured thematically by first framing these issues with presentations from experts in the field with up-to-date information addressing barriers to combating marine litter and the range of national, regional and international response options. These can include presentations from the public and private sector, relevant industry, etc.

**1) Your Organization:** United States Government

**2) Your view on major barriers to combating marine litter and microplastics:**

The United States recognizes that there are many barriers and challenges to this issue that fall into the following categories: Infrastructure – Land and Sea, Public awareness, Governance, Scientific Understanding and Innovation.

Below are some examples of challenges within the categories listed above:

- I. Infrastructure – Land and Sea
  - a. Substantial need for financial investment, both public and private, for adequate waste management infrastructure as well as a better understanding of the extent of existing financial flows for solid waste management infrastructure from major lending institutions such as the World Bank and other MDBs.
  - b. Ineffective collection and transport of waste to dump sites
  - c. Ineffective wastewater systems to address microplastics/microfibers
  - d. Leaking of waste from collection sites, areas at the intersection of land and waterways, and other vulnerable sites
  - e. Recycling issues:
    - i. Addressing materials with low residual value that tend to slip through any recycling system; only about 20% of plastic material has a high residual value to make recycling viable.
    - ii. Managing sorting of materials at the individual, household or business level
    - iii. Lack of data in many nations on waste collection and fate
  - f. Need to enhance and empower informal waste management in developing economies (i.e. waste pickers)
  - g. Managing inputs from sea-based sources, such as fisheries, aquaculture, offshore installations and shipping, and port reception facilities
- II. Public awareness of the issue and understanding barriers to behavioral change
  - a. Elevating waste management as an important priority for all countries
  - b. Raising public awareness about consumer choices and their environmental consequences
  - c. Understanding the barriers to behavioral change
- III. Governance
  - a. Lack of national policies and legislation for waste management systems
  - b. Weak enforcement of waste management regulations
  - c. Evaluate the usefulness of regulations, voluntary programs and other measures on producers and consumers
- IV. Scientific Understanding and Innovation
  - a. Lack of standardized definitions (microplastics, biodegradation in the marine environment)
  - b. Sharing of reproducible, representative, accurate, and precise methodology (sample collection, extraction techniques, characterization, quantification)

- c. Research needed to better understand the actual scale of this problem and its impacts, e.g. the sources, fate, distribution, human and environmental impacts, etc.
- d. Spurring innovation in the area of resource efficiency and/or sustainable materials management with regards to plastics design and packaging, single-use plastics, etc.
- e. Lack of regional, global, national reporting standards and monitoring protocols as well as harmonized methods for monitoring and assessing data

### **3) Your view on potential national, regional and international response options and associated environmental, social and economic costs:**

The discussion of national, regional and international response options should take place prior to identifying environmental, social and economic costs of these different response options. As mandated in the Resolution, member states should first (i) *explore all barriers to combating marine litter/microplastics* and (ii) *identify the range of national, regional and international response options* before moving on to addressing the additional mandate of the AHOEEG.

Response options should:

- Focus international action on management and prevention of litter being released to riverine, coastal and ocean environments.
- Recognize that there are varying solutions across regions, nations and on a subnational or municipal level—e.g. what works in one region, nation or city is not necessarily applicable everywhere.
- Recognize the ubiquitous, multi-media nature of the issue, considering the entire suite of environmental media including marine waters, surface waters, watersheds and rivers, etc.
- Utilize relevant existing global strategies, e.g. Honolulu Strategy, that provide a host of response options through their results-oriented framework, and can serve as an overall guiding document in discussing interventions.
- More effectively engage industry in finding long-term solutions to this problem and recognize that industry groups should be seen as full-fledged partners, as they often drive technological innovation and solutions, provide financial capital, etc.
- Conduct stakeholder outreach, especially with impacted actors, to determine environmental, social and economic costs, recognizing that this will require detailed analysis, literature review and data gathering.
- Examine actions and innovative approaches such as:
  - Advancing platforms for information sharing among stakeholders (industry, researchers, entrepreneurs, governments, communities, NGOs)
  - Identifying potential standards for sustainable waste management (recycling practices, waste-to-energy strategies, landfill reduction strategies, etc.)
  - Identifying options for reducing waste generation and/or increasing the reuse of products
  - Reviewing national or regional action plans that are actively being implemented for their success models
  - Identifying opportunities for enhanced collaboration within existing instruments
- Examine governance strategies and approaches such as:

- Reviewing the GPA as a global umbrella mechanism for addressing land and sea-based sources of marine plastic and microplastics.
- Harmonizing (or developing where they do not exist) marine litter action plans
- Establishing where they do not exist or strengthening regional working groups on marine debris
- Improving enforcement and compliance within instruments that address marine debris
- Working with RFMOs to address fishing-related marine debris

#### **4) Your view on the feasibility and effectiveness of different response options:**

An analysis of the feasibility and effectiveness of different response options should prioritize measures that:

- Expand the scope and efficiency of waste collection systems and collection rates (uncollected plastic waste is more than twice as likely to leak into ocean if it is not collected—Stemming the Tide report, 2015).
- Identify and address litter leakage points in waste management systems—including developing and enforcing laws/regulations on illegal dumping and better siting and management of dump sites (placement of dump sites far from coastal/riverine environments).
- Implement waste-to-energy technologies and practices only as a last resort--this should be viewed as optimal only when no other end-of-life solution for waste is economically viable. For example, this option may be optimal in societies that are burning less-refined oil or coal without proper pollution control technologies. Under this approach, rather than view waste as a problem and burden, it is seen as a valuable resource, one that can be managed to produce sustainable benefits for a range of actors. The benefits ensue when waste is treated as a resource, a resource that can be recovered and put to productive and profitable use.
- Develop systems to derive value from waste. The economic value of waste needs to be recognized, harnessed and exploited. Once the potential of waste is valued, how it is managed will inevitably change. (An example is the integrated resource recovery center model developed by Waste Concern which the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) now promotes extensively across the region.)
- Enhance national and regional level planning to address challenges to waste management caused by natural disasters and hazards (intense tropical storms, major flooding, etc.). National/regional efforts should be made on both disaster preparedness and disaster response policies to cope with the problem of marine litter resulting from extreme events.

The United States believes a goal and outcome of the two AHOEEG meetings prior to UNEA-4 should be the development of a draft list of potential solutions for different waste streams that result in marine litter. Member States (or correspondence groups) would then continue to analyze the costs, benefits, and feasibility of these options and update UNEA-4 participants on progress made by the AHOEEG. As mandated in the Resolution, member states should first (i) *explore all barriers to combating marine litter/microplastics; (ii) identify the range of national, regional and international response options; (iii) identify environmental, social and economic costs and benefits of different response options; and (iv) examine the feasibility and effectiveness of different response options before moving on to addressing the additional mandate of the AHOEEG.*