

Nearly all the world's countries sign deal to prevent plastic waste – except US

Deal will improve handling of plastic waste and prevent it from getting washed or dumped into oceans and rivers, UN says

Guardian staff and agencies

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Trash pollutes the beach in Bali, Indonesia. Photograph: Johannes Christo/Reuters

Almost all the world's countries have agreed on a deal to improve the way they deal with **plastic** waste and prevent so much of it from getting washed or dumped into **oceans** and rivers – with the glaring exception of the United States, the United Nations announced on Friday afternoon.

A “legally binding framework” that affects thousands of types of plastic waste emerged at the end of a two-week meeting of UN-backed conventions on plastic waste and toxic, hazardous chemicals that **threaten the planet's seas and creatures**.

Rolph Payet of the **United Nations** Environment Program says the “historic agreement” linked to the 186-country, UN-supported Basel convention

signatories, meeting in Geneva, Switzerland, means countries will have to monitor and track movements of plastic waste outside their borders.

Such unsightly and often deadly debris clutters pristine land, floats in huge masses in oceans and entangles wildlife, in many cases with fatal results.

The deal affects products used in a broad array of industries, such as healthcare, technology, aerospace, fashion and food and beverages.

The signatory countries agreed to amend the Basel convention, a global treaty that places strict controls on the export of certain types of waste between first world countries and less wealthy nations.

The amendment will make the global trade in plastic waste more transparent and better regulated, while also ensuring that its management is safer for human health and the environment. But the US abstained.

“I’m proud that this week in Geneva, parties to the Basel convention have reached agreement on a legally binding, globally – reaching mechanism for managing plastic waste,” Payet said. “Pollution from plastic waste, acknowledged as a major environmental problem of global concern, has reached epidemic proportions with an estimated 100m tonnes of plastic [110m US tons] now found in the oceans, 80 to 90% of which comes from land-based sources,” his statement continued.

Payet said the negotiations, which began 11 days ago and brought together 1,400 delegates, had gone much further than anticipated.

Officials attributed the progress partly to growing public awareness worldwide – reinforced by documentary films by the British naturalist Sir David Attenborough and others – of the dangers of plastic pollution, especially to marine life.

Marco Lambertini, director general of the environmental and wildlife charity WWF International, said that for too long wealthy countries had abdicated responsibility for enormous quantities of plastic waste and that the new accord was a highly welcome step towards redressing the imbalance and restoring some accountability.

“However, it only goes part of the way. What we – and the planet – need is a comprehensive treaty to tackle the global plastic crisis,” he added.

Payet said the new rules should have a significant impact on ocean pollution and ensure that plastics “do not end up where they should not end up”.

Paul Rose, expedition leader for the National Geographic pristine seas expeditions, said he believed changing public opinion worldwide about plastic pollution had played a positive role in the negotiations.

“It was those iconic images of the dead albatross chicks on the Pacific Islands with their stomachs open and all recognisable plastic items inside it, and most recently, it’s been when we discovered the nano-particles do cross the blood-brain barrier, and we were able to prove that plastic is in us,” Rose said.

Recent images that went viral of dead whales washing up with hundreds of pounds of plastic garbage in their stomachs also widely shocked the public.

A new online petition entitled “Stop dumping plastic in paradise!” has attracted almost a million signatures in the past week.

The new rules will take a year to come into force. But Payet said the signatory countries had said they did not want any delay, adding that the plan was to “hit the ground running”.