

**Plastic Pollution Forum Summary – August 29, 2019**  
**By Sheila Smith, LWV-Greater Cleveland**

The disastrous effects of climate change, ranging from personal health hazards and potential international conflict to water contamination and agricultural nightmares have always been reported on and publicized. However, with recent alarming news, from the U.N.'s frightening [12-year warning](#) to the burning of the [Amazon Rain Forest](#), it appears as if there has been a shift in the severity with which climate change is viewed. While the oil and gas industry and major corporations may seem slow to take action, the public awareness and outcry for the future of our planet is on the rise.

Case in point: Last night's public forum, Plastic Pollution, brought together an engaged group of Clevelanders for a vital, honest discussion on the impact of plastic usage and production on our environment and how Ohio is directly experiencing the effects. Moderated by League of Women Voters Ohio Board Member, Jocelyn Travis, the panel featured Cheryl Johncox, of the Sierra Club Ohio, Sarah Damron, of the Surfrider Foundation, Sunny Simon, Cuyahoga County Councilwoman (District 11), Sarah Matthews of Rumpke Waste and Recycling Services, and Cristie Snyder, of the Cuyahoga County Solid Waste District.

Currently, there are 22 million pounds of plastic in our Great Lakes, 5 million pounds alone in Lake Erie. From larger plastics, such as containers and bags, to tiny microplastics that come off your clothing every time you use a washing machine, plastic pollution stems from a variety of sources. While local residents may believe that if they simply recycle their plastic products, they will be in the clear, this isn't the case. Snyder noted specifically that Cuyahoga County faces an issue with the common belief that any plastic item can be recycled. The actual case is that failure to properly sort your recycling and trash can result in contamination and creating more waste. "You are causing more problems than doing a good deed," she said.

However, the issue is not only with what we are trying (or wishing) to recycle. China's new strict laws regarding waste and contamination have also caused a riff. The country now refuses to take America's plastic and recyclables. This shift has created a crisis, as our country does not have the infrastructure to support an efficient recycling system that can handle all of our waste. "Recycling is a commodity," said Matthews. "Supply and demand are what determine recycling."

If we cannot give our recycling away for a second use, then reducing plastic consumption is the next option. Recently, Cuyahoga County passed a ban on plastic bags that was spearheaded by Councilwoman Simon and is set to take effect at the start of 2020. A small change like this can have a huge impact and help "change things tremendously for future generations." But right on the heels of such a significant step in plastic reduction is House Bill 242 churning in the Ohio Legislature that could quickly reverse it. If passed, HB242 would take away municipalities' authority to establish regulations on any type of auxiliary containers. These types of containers include any items used to transport food or beverages, such as plastic bags, cups, and cans. According to Damron, fifteen states already have these types of laws on the books, and Ohio is next in line.

However, that is not the only item aiming to permeate Ohio's ability to tackle climate change and plastic production. An Appalachian petrochemical hub, explained Johncox, is a current plan in the works by the oil and gas industry to start 20 new projects in Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Ohio. These projects span from creating fracked gas processing facilities, or ethane crackers, to forming underground storage of petrochemicals and fracked gas liquids. The environmental effects of a transformation this size are

numerous, including serious risks to ground water and the Ohio River and an increase in carcinogens and air pollution. Johncox emphasized that five million people currently depend on the Ohio River as their source for drinking water. "This [plan] is the scariest thing I have read in a while, especially for people who have already been preyed upon by the oil and gas industry," she said.

You may be thinking, now what? An important point to remember is that consumer pressure can, in fact, have an impact on these types of daunting changes. The panelists fervently suggested that reducing your plastic waste, analyzing your waste habits, and remaining vocal about your stance on these issues are key steps in plastic pollution opposition. Recycling, even when done properly, cannot always be considered an act of contrition in the case of plastic pollution. Both Rumpke and the Cuyahoga County Solid Waste District offer waste and recycling audits to help corporate spaces implement sustainable practices, in addition to reflecting on your own personal plastic habits. In terms of the larger policy moves, contacting your state representatives to voice your opinion is always a vital use of your rights as a constituent. Even when issues such as climate change seem overwhelming to understand and take action against, Councilwoman Simon offered hopeful final words: "We can all start something."