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New U.S. Government Plan for Microplastics Falls Short of Protecting Human Health

Washington, D.C. — Today, the U.S. Government announced new plans to track and study microplastics (and pharmaceuticals) in Americans' drinking water. But these plans fall short of the action needed to protect human health now. Administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Lee Zeldin and U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS) Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. announced the EPA will now consider microplastics a "priority contaminant group" in the Contaminant Candidate List while HHS will launch a $144 million project to investigate the impact of microplastics on human health.

While it is positive that the U.S. Government is acknowledging the dangers of microplastics, current scientific evidence and documented harms to human health—especially to people on the frontlines of fossil fuels, petrochemicals, and plastics—have already given policymakers sufficient information to act. Touted as a "victory for the health of all Americans," the Trump Administration's plan for microplastics must also include actions that curb plastic production to be truly effective.

"We appreciate the investment in more research about how microplastics affect our bodies and our health, but we already know enough to act. We can limit exposure to harmful microplastics and the chemicals in plastics immediately by reducing the plastics that are polluting the world around us. People are exposed to plastics everywhere: appliances, beverage and food packaging, building materials, children's toys, clothing, medical treatments and supplies, vehicles. We need strong regulatory solutions and innovation to reduce and eliminate these plastics now." —Jen Fela, Managing Director, Plastic Pollution Coalition

Further research and monitoring is necessary, but more importantly, this crisis demands immediate policy action. This announcement also comes amid significant environmental rollbacks, efforts to weaken bedrock protections for clean air, water, and public health, and the weakening of agencies like the EPA and HHS, which now have fewer staff and resources to respond.

The new plan also demonstrates how the U.S. Government's continued lack of meaningful engagement with people living in frontline and fenceline communities undermines effective

action to address the harms of plastic pollution. Failing to adequately and equitably engage with stakeholders further delays the real solutions we need to end plastic pollution.

The Health Impacts of Microplastics & Nanoplastics are Well Documented
Scientists have known for decades that plastic is a material that never breaks down or benignly biodegrades. All plastic items break up into ever-smaller particles that remain plastic. Plastic particles travel through indoor and outdoor air; fresh waters, oceans, and other aquatic ecosystems; soils; plants; weather systems and atmosphere; and in the bodies of animals—including humans. Over the past several years, scientists have detected the presence of tiny plastic particles in people's bloodstreams, bones, bone marrow, brains, breast milk, feces of adults and infants, hair, hearts, kidneys, livers, lungs, penises, placentas, saliva and sputum, semen, skin, spleens, stomachs, testes, throat and airways, urine, uteruses, and veins, with more worrying research now on the way. People breathe, drink, eat, and absorb plastic particles through our skin. Drinking water is a serious route of exposure—but it's just one route.

Microplastics and nanoplastics act as carriers for the more than 16,000 chemicals that are manufactured into plastics. Health problems linked to just a few especially problematic plastic chemicals cost the U.S. healthcare system $250 billion in 2018 alone. According to some of the world's top plastics and health researchers, the social health-related economic losses caused by plastics—which "cause disease and death from infancy to old age" exceed $1.5 trillion annually. These are high costs to pay, especially compared to the paltry $144 million the U.S. Government has now earmarked to study microplastics.

Babies, young people, and pregnant people are especially vulnerable to health issues linked to plastics and plastic chemicals. Many plastic chemicals are known to cause and/or contribute to a wide range of health problems, including a person's risk of hormone-related health issues, such as infertility, metabolic disorders like diabetes and obesity, and auto-immune diseases, cancers, and DNA damage. This, in addition to the toxic and climate-warming pollution and injustices driven by plastic production, transportation, use, and disposal; and the extraction, transportation, storage, and refining of plastic's fossil fuel ingredients.

EPA's Contaminant Candidate List is a Start, but Not Enough
While adding microplastics to the EPA's Contaminant Candidate List signifies awareness of microplastics polluting U.S. drinking water, it does not guarantee regulatory action will follow. The Contaminant Candidate List identifies contaminants that may require future regulation, but does not require continuous monitoring or imposing exposure limits. In addition, a stronger and

more meaningful response would be to include microplastics in the Unregulated Contaminant Monitoring Rule—which seven governors have petitioned the EPA for—that would effectively mandate nationwide data collection on microplastics in drinking water to inform regulation.

About Plastic Pollution Coalition:
Plastic Pollution Coalition is a non-profit communications and advocacy organization that collaborates with an extensive global alliance of organizations, businesses, and individuals to create a more just, equitable, regenerative world free of plastic pollution and its toxic impacts. Plastic Pollution Coalition is a project of Earth Island Institute.
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