

POLLUTION

Frustration finishes out UN plastics meeting

Treaty on plastic pollution hits bumps but continues to lurch forward

As negotiators head home after the third United Nations Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee on Plastic Pollution (INC-3) meeting, some are muttering under their breath. Participants did advance the treaty's ultimate goal—ending plastic pollution—during the session, held from Nov. 13 to 19 in Nairobi, Kenya. But for some, that progress is overshadowed by negotiation breakdowns on the last day.

Disagreements flared over how much,



Participants at the third UN meeting on plastic pollution in Nairobi, Kenya, did not come to agreement on the zero draft of the treaty but did progress the discussion.

and even if, to reduce plastic production, an idea that was displayed prominently in the zero draft of the treaty, published by the UN in September.

Plastic-producing countries and industries argue that production does not have anything to do with pollution, says Björn Beeler, international coordinator for the International Pollutants Elimination Network (IPEN), an advocacy group. "It's an illogical argument because when you produce more plastic, you have more plastic waste," he says. The meeting ended with more proposed amendments to the zero draft and no official direction for the scope of the work before the next session, scheduled for April 2024 in Ottawa, Ontario.

"It was a baby step forward and a missed opportunity to make progress on the supposed timeline," Beeler says. The negotiations were tense, but overall the

treaty is progressing, he says. "Our view is not doom and gloom. This is how meetings go when you have high stakes."

Global Partners for Plastics Circularity (GPPC), a coalition of plastics industry groups, concurs that INC-3 moved the conversation toward an effective and practical plastics agreement. "The GPPC commend government negotiators for improving the Zero Draft by adding elements needed to accomplish the agreement's intent—ending plastic pollution," Benny Mermans, chair of the World Plastics Council, says in a statement.

INC-3 was the third of five meetings organized to hammer out an international, legally binding treaty to curb plastic pollution. Negotiators plan to reach consensus at INC-5, which will take place in Seoul, South Korea, in November 2024.

One of the main concerns was how to finance the eventual treaty. "The global south wants to have that conversation immediately," Beeler says. "But developed countries don't want to commit to [financing] at all. Before they fund this thing, they want to know what they're funding."

Another sticking point is defining the life cycle of plastic; that determines which entities are responsible for the pollution. Some organizations say the life cycle starts when the carbon source comes out of the ground, says Jessica Roff, plastics program manager at the Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives (GAIA). "Oil countries are saying that it's once [plastic] becomes waste," Beeler says. "A more moderate argument is that once you ... make plastic, that leads to pollution."

It's now up to the chairs of the meeting to sort through the submissions and create an updated copy of the zero draft ahead of INC-4, Roff says. "We're an entire session behind," she says. "We did not accomplish many of the working parts of the document that were supposed to get done."

The process is chaotic, Beeler says, but the treaty will get there in the end. "The first draft is coming, but it's like honey that's been in the fridge," he says. "It's very slow."—LEIGH KRIETSCH BOERNER

UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION

North Carolina college ends chemistry major

Warren Wilson College, a liberal arts college in North Carolina, will eliminate its chemistry major next academic year. In addition, the college will discontinue majors in math, philosophy, history and political science, and global studies.

Starting in the fall of 2024, Warren Wilson will no longer admit incoming students into the five majors. Students who are currently pursuing the majors will be offered the courses they need to graduate, says Jay Roberts, the college's provost.

Eventually, however, the college intends to cut some of the more advanced courses that are offered as a part of the discontinued majors. For example, Langdon Martin, chair of Warren Wilson's chemistry department, suspects that the quantum chemistry class will be on the chopping block "since it's been a course that hasn't had much enrollment beyond chemists."

The cuts are the result of a "strategic planning process" spearheaded by the college's new president, Damián Fernández. To decide which majors to eliminate, Fernández and Roberts consulted Warren Wilson's academic planning committee, which is composed of five elected faculty members, each representing one of the college's divisions.

The committee compared trends in class enrollment and student interest in each major over 3–5 years. Between the biochemistry and chemistry majors, he adds, "we graduate about 6 or 7 students per year, with a very high standard deviation," says Martin, who was not involved in the decision-making process. Regarding class size, "we've had a lot of upper-level courses with small enrollments. That didn't count in our favor, unfortunately."—KRYSTAL VASQUEZ