

Commentary: Canada's 'toxic' label for plastics to harm global health, trade

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By Tony Radoszewski Nov. 20, 2020

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Canada and the United States have a lot in common. Colonial histories. Wide open spaces. Niagara Falls. Our federal governments both have a bad habit of issuing sweeping regulations that would never pass Parliament (or Congress).

Bypassing the legislative process and provincial authorities, Canada's government recently announced its intention to label plastics "toxic," a regulatory overreach of global proportions that will damage public health, international trade and the North American economy.

First things first. Plastics are not toxic. Just take a look around the Texas Medical Center for proof. You'll find plastic jars and syringes, plastic instruments and gowns, plastic gauze and plastic packaging.

There's also all the plastic you don't see: artificial hearts, joints and other implanted devices that would be impossible without biologically safe plastic. Some plastics are even soluble, helping patients to digest drugs. Others heal wounds.

How could these medical miracles be toxic? The idea seems especially strange during a pandemic, when plastic gloves, face masks and barriers are essential to preventing and treating COVID-19. Public health officials in the United States and Canada are mandating plastic masks, the majority plastic.



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They couldn't possibly be toxic. That's why defenders of the proposed regulation admit that "this does not necessarily mean [plastics] are 'toxic' in the way the word is commonly used."

Modern material

Throwing that word around is dangerous. Not only has plastic revolutionized health care, this modern material keeps food fresher, longer, undergoing rigorous testing by the world's leading health authorities. Plastic to-go containers and cutlery have helped hard-hit restaurants stay in business during lockdowns.

Bans on everyday conveniences like straws and spoons, however, are just the tip of the iceberg. If Canada's misguided "toxic" label were to take effect, any U.S. product containing plastic could be subject to import restrictions, potentially violating the United States-Mexico-Canada trade agreement.

Over \$12 billion in U.S. exports to Canada could be in jeopardy. If other countries were to retaliate, over \$10 billion in Canadian exports could be as well.

These conservative estimates fail to fully capture the potential harm to auto, medical, electronics, and other major industries depending on plastic. The "toxic" label could even restrict international recycling programs to protect the environment.

As the Plastics Industry Association wrote to Canada's Trade Ministry, "This approach by Canada - taken without consultation with the United States and Canada's other close trading partners - directly threatens trade in plastic materials and products containing plastics, causing unintended consequences and commercial impacts across virtually every value chain."

Dozens of organizations, representing industries as varied as recycling, energy, transportation, health care and housing, joined the letter to support reliable science, international cooperation, free trade, economic growth, jobs, and environmental sustainability.

Not only does the USMCA provide a framework for our countries to prevent plastic and other waste from entering the environment, it also sets rules to regulate chemicals — without jeopardizing millions of jobs across the continent, where oil and gas, petrochemicals and plastics are strong, globally competitive industries.

In the United States alone, plastics is the eighth largest domestic industry, supporting over a million jobs and almost a half-billion dollars of economic value. Mexico and Canada are our top trading partners. The U.S. is a huge market for plastics or products containing plastics from both countries.

Real issues

The "toxic" label would be especially bad for Canada's Alberta province, an energy hub with a vibrant plastics economy integral to the North American supply chain. Leaders there are expressing concerns that bad science, leading to worse regulations, will make economic recovery from the COVID-19 more difficult than it already is. We feel the exact same way south of the border.

The U.S. plastics industry is working with our neighbors to solve the real issues, litter and waste, dedicating enormous resources and talent to lowering emissions, developing recyclable and biodegradable materials, and funding new infrastructure in countries that lack waste collection and recycling programs.

Canada's "toxic" label will hurt ongoing cooperation, progress and populations on both sides of the border, who make a living in industries up and downstream from plastics, from energy to hospitality, not to mention all those people who need affordable, practical plastic to live in comfort and prosperity.

What's truly toxic is the idea of eliminating one of the greatest innovations of all time.

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