



U.S.-CANADA SHARED PRIORITIES FOR A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

Meridian International Center and The Coca-Cola Company co-hosted a working summit of 35 predominately U.S. and Canadian leaders representing industry, government, nonprofit and academia to discuss pathways towards a sustainable future ahead of the 44th G7 Summit to be held in Quebec on June 8 and 9. Held on May 24 at Meridian's campus in Washington, DC, the working summit served as an opportunity to explore cross-border opportunities to protect our planet's waterways from the emerging threat of plastics.

It is no secret that the world's oceans have suffered greatly from plastic pollution – the Great Pacific Garbage Patch is now estimated to span 1.6 million square kilometers, an area three times the size of France. Yet, there is even more plastic in our ocean than this staggering statistic captures; microplastics and microfibers, infinitesimally tiny fragments of designed and broken-down plastics, have tainted all water systems on Earth. This includes freshwater and, increasingly, drinking water systems. Microplastics represent a threat to ecosystems, economies, and human health. These concerns were at the crux of discussions at the working summit.

In addition to shared-use oceans, the U.S. and Canada share a border that dissects the Great Lakes region, one of the most economically robust and ecologically significant areas in the world. This geographic relationship, in addition to a well-established diplomatic relationship, positions the U.S. and Canada to lead the global community in the charge towards a sustainable future for our planet's oceans and freshwater systems. Industry, nonprofit, governmental and academic representatives present at the working summit posited that, in order to realize these aspirations, actors from the U.S. and Canada should concentrate their attention on three broad areas: developing communication, increasing innovation, and strengthening collaboration.

COMMUNICATION

An underlining theme of the working summit was the call for more frequent and cohesive communication across sectors and geographies to catalyze sustainable change on a global scale. Communication is already underway between the U.S. and Canada, and will continue at the upcoming G7 Summit. With dialogue already established, these two great powers must set the tone of the global conversation.

The G7 Summit presents a unique opportunity for world leaders to lay and advance the frameworks for a collective understanding of marine and freshwater pollution, conservation, and avenues to tackle the issues of microfibers and microplastics. How these global leaders choose to frame this issue at the G7 Summit will permanently alter discourse on these topics while shaping the future of environmental governance and sustainability.

The working summit uncovered several key pillars to building a shared framework to address plastic pollution and sustainable alternatives. First and foremost, the global community needs a collective understanding of the root causes of microplastic pollution in waterways; plastic pollution must be addressed at its source, and the source(s) of said pollution must be clearly identified and agreed upon. Additionally, a common understanding of the risks of plastic pollution must be constructed and shared widely. Participants overwhelmingly called for a versatile language that captures the nature of the problem and is comprehensible to individuals from all sectors and nations. This common conceptual framework should be constructed through the collaboration of governmental, nongovernmental, industry, academic and political representatives alike.

The Great Lakes region shared by the U.S. and Canada is an optimal location to explore bilateral efforts to constructing these frameworks. The Great Lakes can serve as proving grounds for the introduction of sustainable supply chains, innovative research models, and new methods of preventing and removing microplastic pollution. Once progress is made on this front, the U.S. and Canada can construct the language framework and proliferate the message to a larger global audience. Nongovernmental participants in the summit were particularly excited about the potential this region represents, while industry and governmental representatives were receptive to novel ideas about partnerships, production and governance. Though industry and governmental interests often come into tension with one another, representatives from both sectors expressed a willingness to collaborate more openly with one another. Nonprofit representatives recognized a role to play in the facilitation of such dialogue as the intermediary “conscience” representing the interests of all. The Recycling Partnership, an organization represented at the working summit, already operates in such capacities to protect both public and private interests with respect to recycling. The organization was founded to foster cohesion between industries and the 20,000 local governments across the U.S. as they set their recycling standards.

Through the working summit dialogue, the notion was raised for the G7 to commission a report on microplastics, microfibers and the risks of plastics pollution similar to the report they published on climate security. The central idea here is that there is value to publishing reports at the early stages of research prior to the establishment of many “certainties.”

All participants agreed that the U.S. and Canada should commit to regular meetings to foster continued dialogue and bilateral progress toward shared sustainable goals. Governments, nonprofits, and corporations have the resources to ensure that such gatherings and conversations continue to unfold. The relatively younger working summit participants advocated for millennials to assume a larger platform as part of the conversation. Youth and young adults apply problem solving differently via apps and other present-day technology, and should be considered valuable assets in the mission to remediate plastic pollution. The annual hack-a-thon hosted by Aqua Forum at Lake Ontario is a shining example of how the brightest young minds are developing clean-tech solutions to North America’s freshwater problems.

INNOVATION

The working summit underscored the need for innovation within and across sectors in order to adequately address both plastic pollution in shared waterways and the ubiquity of plastics. The focus of such initiatives should be on the prevention of continued pollution. Market operations, production, manufacturing and infrastructure can each be reimaged to function more sustainably.

Although there is an increasing and pressing demand for expertise on environmental matters – both by the public, in the market and in governance systems – many barriers stand in the way of expanding research capacity. There was strong consensus for promoting thorough research on microplastic pollution and sustainable alternatives should be a top priority of Canada, the U.S. and the remaining G7 nations. Improved systems of research will accelerate the development of governance strategies to prevent more plastic pollution and inform the greater public. It is paramount that strategic plans and policy outcomes regarding plastic pollution in our shared water systems maintain solid foundations in scientific evidence gathered from thorough research. In order to realize these ideals, capacity for research must be expanded at every level of the state and international community.

Plastic pollution and the conservation of our shared waterways must be addressed and combatted at its source: in our economic structures and supply chains. Bringing widespread, genuine sustainability into reality will require a fundamental paradigmatic shift in the way developed economies have come to operate. Circular

economy models stand to replace traditional linear models. Creating markets for recycled, manufacturable materials will spur a transition towards sustainable production at the foundational tier of supply chains. Large multinational corporations are poised to lead the way working alongside governments and civil society. This is already underway with endeavors such as Coca-Cola's "World Without Waste" initiative to collect and recycle one bottle or can for every bottle or can sells by 2030.

A sustainable economy can be built through these reforms to our existing models. With a burgeoning demand for sustainably produced goods amongst consumers, momentum is building for actualizing circular economies, sustainable markets and production methods. Innovation of policy schemes over matters of plastics management could spur increased public participation in recycling. Governmental voices at the working summit brought attention to the possible promotion of deposit bills – laws that mandate a certain rebate to consumers for properly disposing of certain recyclable goods such as plastic bottles. Such legislation has been in effect in various parts of the U.S. and Canada, and citizens have responded with increases in recycling rates. Similar legislation could feasibly be adopted at the local, regional and national level. Once again, the Great Lakes region, with its booming industries, economy and large population, could serve as a test bed for these sorts of incremental changes. Both the U.S. and Canada should elevate these ideas as we continue to strengthen the bilateral relationship. These aspirations can be realized with strong policy frameworks that support industries and governments in their innovative efforts and promote these transitions towards more sustainable economic and production models.

COLLABORATION

The working summit added further certainty to the notion that no single country, industry or nonprofit can tackle this complex and pervasive dilemma alone. Participants repeatedly emphasized the need for the collective efforts of governments, industries, nonprofits, academics, policymakers and private citizens to reduce plastic consumption and pollution and create a world in which sustainable alternatives to plastics can thrive. Respect for and appropriate implementation of the diverse expertise, skill sets and priorities of different stakeholder groups underlie a robust, efficacious and sustainable approach to problem solving. The various sectors must value one another as equitable partners rather than separate entities. This can be achieved through more frequent conversations between cross-sections of sustainability leaders from all sectors.

The U.S. and Canada are already engaging in such dialogue, and have a history of collaborating through bodies, such as the International Joint Commission. Those gathered for the working summit pushed for continued dialogue and collaboration from nongovernmental entities. One organization presented as a model from outside of the region was EcoPeace Middle East, an entity that has experienced great success with multinational environmental governance. EcoPeace Middle East models science diplomacy and coordinated data collection, and develops environmental plans and programs (their most recent being a Program on Water Security) to be shared with the world. Giving more credence to bilateral organizations such as these to govern the Great Lakes and foster sustainable progress there should be an important consideration of governments and nonprofits on both sides of the border.

Several participants raised suggestions on how bilateral cooperation can advance within and extend beyond governance systems and governmental institutions. The sharing of more data and strategies with their bilateral counterparts by federal government entities, such as the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, was raised. Beyond national governments, the important role of municipal governments was highlighted. The need for multi-sector partnerships at the city level is an area of opportunity. During the working summit, Coca-Cola and DC government officials underscored their interest in working together to develop frameworks for

municipal-industry collaboration with respect to plastics. There are numerous multi-sector partnerships that could be developed within each country and bilaterally to contend with various aspects of plastic pollution. Nonprofit representatives noted that the medical community, for example, could be incorporated into the nexus of collaboration as valuable partners on research initiatives. Particularly in the Great Lakes region, this collaboration becomes all the more relevant as we begin to question the impacts of microplastics and microfibers on human health. Leaders at the working summit were hopeful that engagement from the medical sector could incentivize greater government funding for research development.

Leaders of the developed nations of the world must recognize their access to recycling as both a privilege and a responsibility to fulfill. Many countries with emerging economies do not yet have the infrastructure in place to adequately manage the waste their growing populations are producing; even in developed economies, marginalized societal groups do not have access to sustainable lifestyles, and bear the brunt of environmental consequences. Governments with established economies and infrastructures could consider supporting developing communities and nations to formulate practical solutions as they grapple with these challenges. It is in the collective interest of all global citizens to ensure that waste management infrastructure is operating at its most efficient and least impactful everywhere – ecosystemic and human health are at serious risk if microplastic pollution continues.

Those assembled for the working summit were united in their belief that the G7 Summit presents world leaders with an opportunity to strengthen and reinvent multinational environmental governance with tangible and actionable outcomes. Interventions planned and implemented must encompass the multitude of contributing factors that have produced the plastics dilemma. The global community desires communication, collaboration and innovation to meet these ends. It is now the task of the leaders at the G7 Summit to begin setting the foundation for these ideals to come to fruition. The U.S. and Canada would be wise to capitalize on this opportunity to leverage the G7's ability to accelerate financial and policy progress on this pressing issue. Mobilizing to prevent plastic pollution in the Great Lakes region and beyond represents an opportunity for the U.S. and Canada to strengthen their existing relationship, create a global impact, and catalyze a worldwide movement to eliminate plastic and microplastic pollution in our cherished water systems.



The Coca-Cola Company