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# ExxonMobil Accused of “Deceptively” Promoting Chemical Recycling as a Solution for the Plastics Crisis

The California attorney general’s lawsuit, which cites ProPublica reporting, alleges that products made with Exxon’s process contain only a small fraction of the recycled plastic that they claim to have.



Workers pull plastic bags off a conveyor belt as they sort through recyclable materials at Recology’s Recycle Central in San Francisco. Justin Sullivan/Getty Images

**by Lisa Song**

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In a landmark lawsuit filed this week, [the California attorney general](#) accused ExxonMobil of “deceptively” promoting chemical recycling as a solution for the plastics crisis, citing ProPublica’s recent reporting and expanding on our findings.

In June, we examined the [oil giant’s claim that it had transformed discarded plastic into new fruit cups through an “advanced” chemical recycling technology called pyrolysis](#). We broke down the math to show just how little recycled content winds up in products made this way and how companies inflate that percentage in their marketing.

The lawsuit cited the fruit cup example alongside the attorney general’s own discoveries, which reveal an even more extreme gap between what ExxonMobil advertises and how much recycled plastic its products actually contain.

ProPublica reported that plastic made via pyrolysis can’t contain more than 10% recycled content. Because the technology is shrouded in secrecy, we could not determine the specific amount in ExxonMobil’s products.

Citing internal company documents, the lawsuit said ExxonMobil’s process yields less than 0.1% recycled plastic content.

Yet it marketed the cups as containing “30% ISCC PLUS certified-circular content” — shorthand for 30% recycled — through a controversial accounting method called mass balance, which allows recyclers to pump up the advertised recycledness of one product by reducing the advertised recycledness of other, less lucrative products.

The lawsuit cited ProPublica’s reporting on [the first federal action against mass balance](#), taken last month when the Environmental Protection Agency prohibited its use in a voluntary program for sustainable products. The California lawsuit said mass balance is “widely criticized, including by some members of the plastics industry, precisely because it is deceptive to the public.”

ExxonMobil has a “massive financial interest” in ensuring that mass balance methods are “accepted broadly and even enshrined in law,” the lawsuit stated. “Indeed, continuing the public deception is ExxonMobil’s business model.”

During a press conference on Monday, California Attorney General Rob Bonta blasted the oil giant for “falsely touting ‘advanced recycling’” as a solution to the plastic crisis, calling it ExxonMobil’s “biggest greenwashing campaign.”

In a statement, an ExxonMobil spokesperson insisted that advanced recycling works. “To date, we’ve processed more than 60 million pounds of plastic waste into usable raw materials, keeping it out of landfills.” California officials have known for decades that the state’s recycling system isn’t effective, the statement said. “Instead of suing us, they could have worked with us to fix the problem.”

The California lawsuit does not focus solely on chemical recycling. It accused ExxonMobil of misleading the public for decades about the sustainability of plastic, first by promoting traditional recycling despite knowing that plastic is functionally not recyclable, and more recently by marketing advanced recycling as a cure-all. Unlike traditional recycling, advanced recycling uses heat or chemicals to break plastic down to its molecular building blocks. But it’s done little to improve America’s 5% plastic recycling rate and can’t solve the environmental damage or health problems caused by microplastics and toxic chemicals.

Plastic recycling is “a farce, a lie, a deceit,” Bonta said during the press conference. “One thing ExxonMobil actually does is recycle its lies.”

Judith Enck, founder of the advocacy group Beyond Plastics, called California’s action “the most consequential lawsuit in the country” in terms of holding the plastics industry accountable and told ProPublica it reminded her of the tobacco lawsuits from the 1990s, which eventually led to billions of dollars in settlements for deceptive advertising on the risks of smoking.

The lawsuit seeks an abatement fund to mitigate the harm caused by the company’s actions. Bonta told reporters that the fund — which he hopes will be “to the tune of billions of dollars” — will pay for efforts such as educating the public about the truth of plastic recycling. Enck said she wants the money to expand the refill-and-reuse infrastructure in California. That could include installing dishwashing equipment in schools and hospitals to reduce single-use plastic, or adding water bottle refill stations, which appear in airports but are rare in other public spaces.

Bonta’s lawsuit was filed on the same day as a [separate lawsuit from four environmental groups](#), including the Sierra Club. The suit similarly accuses ExxonMobil of misleading the public about the recyclability of plastic. Bonta and the groups’ leaders spoke at the same press conference.

Enck said ProPublica’s reporting and other news outlets “created breadcrumbs for litigators.” The California lawsuit comes two years after Bonta’s office [sent subpoenas to ExxonMobil and industry trade groups to investigate](#) their “historic and ongoing efforts to deceive the public.”

The lawsuit also cited the company’s collaboration with trade groups like the American Chemistry Council. From 2020-2023, for instance, the company gave the council \$19.4 million for an ad campaign and national policy work on advanced recycling. One video, which got more than 8 million YouTube views, declared:

“Imagine a future where plastic is not wasted but instead remade over and over into the things that keep our food fresher, our families safer and our planet cleaner.”

This ad campaign, “with ExxonMobil at the helm, deceptively seeks to convince consumers that recycling, especially ‘advanced recycling,’ will save the day in order to continue saturating the public and the planet with single-use plastic,” the lawsuit said.

“It is disappointing that legal action has diverted time and resources away from our industry’s efforts to scale up a circular economy for plastics,” the American Chemistry Council said in a statement. “Regardless, we remain steadfast in our mission to advocate for effective policy, collaborate with communities, and invest in new technologies that help to increase plastics recycling and recycled plastic use in products, contributing to a more sustainable future.”

ExxonMobil’s ads are misleading because the company knows its advanced recycling process is not economically viable and can only handle small amounts of consumer waste, the lawsuit noted. In fact, only about 8% of the waste plastic fed into its advanced recycling system becomes new plastic; the rest gets burned up as fuel or becomes other nonplastic products. Even if ExxonMobil operated a potential future project that’s more efficient, it would only be able to turn 13% of the waste plastic into new plastic.

“The truth is ExxonMobil’s ‘advanced recycling’ program is less like a recycling program,” the lawsuit said, “and more like a waste disposal or destruction program akin to the incineration solutions advocated by ExxonMobil in the past.”

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