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Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Peters, and Members of the Subcommittee:

I appreciate the opportunity to testify today to discuss the role of the Department of State in working on the international stage on reducing marine debris. We have found regular communication between the State Department and our interagency partners helpful to ensure efficient and effective utilization of our combined resources and expertise in our global marine debris engagement.

Marine Debris: The Real Sea Monster

Marine debris is a large and growing global problem. It harms fishing industries through losses due to abandoned or derelict fishing gear that continue to capture fish stock but also by polluting marine habitats, thereby lowering seafood catches, and ultimately reducing food security. Floating debris fouls ship drives and poses major navigational hazards for ocean-going vessels, increasing costs for seaborne trade. It also imposes significant socio-economic costs, particularly for the tourism industry by forcing local, state, and national governments to spend millions of dollars cleaning up beaches or through lost revenue from tourists who choose to spend their vacations away from polluted marine environments.

Though marine debris includes various materials, such as glass, metal, cloth, and rubber, one of the most common, and troublesome, is plastic. Plastic is a major source of marine debris due to its widespread use -- a function of its utility, durability, and low price. Globally, reliable estimates indicate that plastic use may double by 2025 and quadruple by 2050, leading to a dramatic increase in marine debris unless we take action. Current estimates indicate that there are *already* 150 million tons of plastic waste in the ocean, with another 8 million tons added each year. Without action, there could be one ton of plastic for every three tons of fish by 2025. By 2050, there could be more plastic than fish (by weight) in the ocean.

This plastic will not go away readily. Plastic can take hundreds of years to decompose naturally. Even worse, in many cases it degrades into smaller "micro plastic" fragments that are impossible to retrieve, but which enter the food chain when consumed by sea life.

This problem cannot be solved by one country alone. Objects that enter the ocean in one location can wash up thousands of miles away, making marine debris a fundamentally transnational issue. Plastic debris has been found in all of the world's waters, from our domestic waterways, the Arctic ice, and the most remote uninhabited Pacific islands. The very visible nature of marine debris, and rapidly growing awareness of its costs, makes it an issue of strong public interest. Increasingly, international fora are taking up the question of marine debris as the vast scale of the problem becomes understood.

Combatting marine plastic pollution requires efforts from all stakeholders, public and private. We welcome efforts by the U.S. private sector to work with governments and other actors to address the problem. Plastic products are ubiquitous in modern life because plastic is so useful and cost effective, and often without economically viable alternatives, which means that reductions or bans on plastic items cannot be the sole solution. The American plastics industry estimates it will more than triple the net exports of plastics to $21.5 billion by 2030. As a result, the U.S. private sector also seeks to promote sustainable and responsible plastics use, including by improving waste management in markets where waste leakage into the waterways contributes to marine debris.

Taking Action Globally

The Department of State, through the Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs, is working with interagency, private sector, academic, industry, and non-governmental stakeholders to engage multilaterally, regionally, and bilaterally to address this increasingly pressing issue.

Our goal is to develop a comprehensive and coordinated approach that brings to bear the American expertise on this matter – both inside and outside of the U.S. government – to others around the world.

For example, the Our Ocean conferences brought together diverse international stakeholders and underscored the importance of global cooperation – both from the public and private sector – to prevent and reduce marine debris. The

conferences have yielded significant public and private action, including around $1 billion committed towards marine pollution alone in the U.S.-led 2016 conference in Washington, D.C. That marine pollution will remain a focus in the 2017 Our Ocean conference to be hosted by the European Union in Malta this October is a testament to the global commitment to reducing marine debris.

The United Nations has also given marine debris an increasingly prominent role in recent years, partly because the United States has worked extensively to elevate the issue within UN bodies. As you will hear from my colleague Nancy Wallace at NOAA, the UN's Global Partnership on Marine Litter was launched in June 2012. Since then, nations, including the United States, have worked in concert to prevent and reduce marine debris worldwide, while mitigating its impact on economies and human and animal health. The recent UN Ocean Conference, focused on the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 14, put marine debris front and center.

The G7 and G20 fora are also opportunities to push for progress in tackling marine debris.

In the G7, we are working to promote better coordination of various individual country initiatives supporting additional research on micro plastics and their impact on human health, improved scientific monitoring, and advocating for better use of resources to recover, reduce, recycle and repurpose waste. We also support the G7 focus on working through the existing Regional Seas Programs and Regional Fisheries Management Organizations to address this issue.

In the G20, we seek to connect key developing G20 member partners such as India, Brazil and South Africa with U.S. expert agencies to share our expertise and to promote their capacity to become regional leaders in combatting marine debris. The G7 and G20 efforts complement the United Nations Environmental Assembly's work to implement regional marine litter plans of action.

The United States is a member of two Regional Seas Programs that engage neighboring countries to collaborate on preventing marine pollution of various types from entering the ocean. Through the Caribbean Environment Program, created in connection with the Cartagena Convention, we led an effort to make marine debris reduction a priority and instituted an initiative in partnership with the EPA to develop community-based trash reduction projects and create effective solid waste management policies. Projects in Jamaica and Panama are already underway and helping to keep marine debris out of the Caribbean.

We are also actively engaged in the southern Pacific, home to the Hawaiian Islands and U.S. territories and Freely Associated States, through financial and technical support under the auspices of the Convention for the Protection of the Natural Resources and Environment of the South Pacific Region, also known as the Noumea Convention. These measures directly affect the quality of life and act to preserve the environment for American citizens and nationals.

Combatting marine debris will require sustained concerted and comprehensive action. We need innovations in materials and design, dramatic changes in consumer behavior, and significantly improved waste management to significantly reduce the amount of marine debris. The solutions will also necessarily vary according to regional and national context.

For example, work by manufacturers on improved packaging design to reduce the use of plastics is necessary for the nations designing and producing plastic goods. But this solution does not translate to developing nations where many consumers are forced to use single-use plastic sachets of daily goods like soap and detergent, simply because they cannot afford to buy larger containers. We need different solutions to effectively fit the local realities.

Targeting Marine Debris at the Source

We are currently focused on reducing marine debris in East Asia as the best use of our resources to maximize our impact. Rapidly developing Asian economies are responsible for more than half of all plastic waste leaking into the ocean because their economic growth outstripped waste handling capacity. With just five countries in Asia generating more marine debris than the rest of the world combined, we can target interventions where they will have the most impact. Facilitating investment in waste management infrastructure in these developing nations can lead to dramatic reductions in plastics entering the ocean in a relatively short time.

In APEC, for example, we partnered last year with the Japanese government, American industry and conservation groups to convene a meeting of government officials, development banks, experts, and NGOs to spur financing for solid waste management systems in the Asia Pacific. We are now engaged with a wide range of stakeholders within the U.S. government, with foreign partners, academia, the private sector, and NGOs in an effort to develop the next steps to tackling this problem at the source.

When appropriate, we are also working with key bilateral partners. For example, the Department of State is working closely with U.S. technical agencies and other partners to support the government of Indonesia's recently stated ambitious goal of reducing its marine litter by 70 percent by 2025. As part of that effort, we have sponsored Dr. Jenna Jambeck of the University of Georgia, who did ground-breaking work on sources of marine debris, on an Embassy speaking tour to Indonesia, the Philippines, Japan, and South Africa, which will provide multiple opportunities to connect one of the foremost experts in the field with policymakers, media, and other influential audiences to catalyze action.

We are also facilitating a program between the Chinese cities of Xiamen and Weihai and New York and San Francisco to share best practices on waste management to reduce and prevent the creation of marine litter. Both sides are working to develop an integrated waste management plan that can be used to reduce land-based sources of pollution in the marine environment. This follows a visit of Chinese officials to New York, Chicago, and San Francisco to see how U.S. cities have tackled the problem of marine litter by focusing on upstream preventative measures.

These are some examples of the State Department's engagement on marine debris in close coordination with our interagency colleagues and international partners. Marine debris, in particular marine plastic pollution, has consequential ramifications for the economy and food security directly impacting the United States. As the SOS bill recognizes, addressing marine debris is impossible without close international coordination. And the success of the Our Ocean conferences illustrates that American leadership can catalyze action to advance progress in our global efforts to combat marine debris.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to testify. I would be pleased to answer any questions.