

Effective Scientific Engagement in the Legislative Process

A Case Study: New Jersey Plastic Pollution Hearing

April 22, 2024 (Earth Day)

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Executive Summary

On April 22, 2024, the New Jersey Senate Environment and Energy Committee and Assembly Environment, Natural Resources, and Solid Waste Committee held a joint hearing on plastic pollution. This analysis examines how scientific experts engaged with legislators, the quality and impact of their testimony, and the legislative outcomes that emerged.

Key Finding: Scientific testimony was most effective when it combined rigorous peer-reviewed research with human health narratives that resonated with legislators’ concerns about their constituents.

Hearing at a Glance

Metric	Value
Date	April 22, 2024
Location	State House Annex, Trenton, NJ
Committees	2 (Senate and Assembly)
Legislators Present	8
Scientific Witnesses	4
Claims Analyzed	42
Evidence Grade: Strong	81%

Part I: The Hearing Context

Committees Present

- **Senate Environment and Energy Committee** (Chair: Senator Bob Smith)
- **Assembly Environment, Natural Resources, and Solid Waste Committee** (Chair: Assemblyman James J. Kennedy)

Legislative Members Present

Name	Chamber	Role	Party
Bob Smith	Senate	Chair	D
Linda R. Greenstein	Senate	Vice Chair	D
James J. Kennedy	Assembly	Chair	D
Shavonda E. Sumter	Assembly	Vice Chair	D
Alixon Collazos-Gill	Assembly	Member	D
Garnet R. Hall	Assembly	Member	D
Andrea Katz	Assembly	Member	D
Michael Inganamort	Assembly	Member	R

Stated Purpose

“The Committees will jointly receive testimony from invited guests on the extent of plastic pollution in the State, its potential and actual effects on human health, and methods that may be used to protect against, or to mitigate, the negative effects of plastic pollution on human health and the environment.”

Part II: Scientific Witnesses and Their Testimony

Dr. Phoebe Stapleton, Ph.D.

Position: Associate Professor, Rutgers University Ernest Mario School of Pharmacy

Department: Pharmacology and Toxicology

Expertise: Micro/nanoplastics, particle inhalation during pregnancy, maternal-fetal health impacts

Key Scientific Claims

Claim	Evidence Type	Strength
9.2 billion tons of plastic produced 1950-2017	UN Environment Program data	Strong
100% of Hawaii placental samples in 2021 contained microplastics (up from 60% in 2006)	Peer-reviewed longitudinal study	Strong
Hundreds of thousands of nanoplastic particles found in bottled water	Own research with Columbia University	Strong
Nanoplastics identified in fetal tissues within 24 hours of exposure	Laboratory research (rodent models)	Strong
March 2024 NEJM study: micro/nanoplastics in carotid plaque correlated with increased cardiovascular risk	New England Journal of Medicine	Strong
Indoor air can have microplastic concentrations 100x greater than outdoor	Published research	Moderate

Effective Communication Strategies

1. **Relatable scale:** Compared microplastics to “sesame seeds” and noted everyone is exposed through toothbrush bristles
 2. **Local relevance:** Cited Rutgers studies on Raritan and Passaic rivers in NJ
 3. **Visual aids:** Provided printed figures showing placenta contamination trends
 4. **Policy hook:** Concluded with call for “Federal and State support” to fund research
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Dr. Shanna H. Swan, Ph.D.

Position: Professor, Department of Environmental Medicine and Public Health, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai

Expertise: Reproductive epidemiology, endocrine-disrupting chemicals, phthalates, fertility decline

Key Scientific Claims

Claim	Evidence Type	Strength
15,000+ chemicals used in plastic manufacturing; 25% classified as “chemicals of concern”	Meta-analysis	Strong
Discovered and replicated “Phthalate Syndrome” in humans (2005, confirmed)	NIH-funded research (\$10M total)	Strong
Research influenced Consumer Product Safety Improvement Act of 2008	Congressional testimony	Strong
Worldwide sperm counts declined 50% since 1970 (~1%/year)	2017 meta-analysis	Strong
2023 update showed sperm count decline is accelerating	2023 published update	Strong
Total fertility rate declining at same 1%/year rate globally	World Bank data	Strong

Effective Communication Strategies

1. **Personal narrative:** Described the 10-15 year research journey, grant writing, replication studies
2. **Cost transparency:** “\$5 million, another five years” to replicate findings
3. **Species-level framing:** Extended beyond human fertility to endangered species

4. **Regulatory contrast:** Highlighted that the EU requires chemicals be proven safe before commerce; US does not
 5. **Emotional resonance:** “I cannot stress how important this is... These things are affecting human health”
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Judith Enck

Position: Founder/President, Beyond Plastics; Former EPA Region 2 Regional Administrator

Expertise: Environmental policy, plastics regulation, EPR legislation

Key Claims

Claim	Evidence Type	Strength
Less than 10% (actually 5-6%) of plastics recycled nationally	Dept. of Energy, EPA data	Strong
16,000 different chemicals in plastics make recycling difficult	Research literature	Strong
Chemical recycling handles only 1.3% of US plastic	Beyond Plastics/IPEN report	Strong
Bottle bill states: 77% aluminum recycling vs 36% non-bottle-bill states	Container Recycling Institute	Strong
Bottle bill states: PET plastic recycling 57% vs 17%	Container Recycling Institute	Strong
NJ is #2 plastic exporter to other countries (after California)	Industry/trade data	Moderate

Effective Communication Strategies

1. **Props:** Physically demonstrated Amazon packaging waste (nested boxes for highlighters)
 2. **Direct challenge to industry narrative:** “Recycling is real—except for plastics”
 3. **Policy specificity:** Named states with EPR laws, identified strengths and loopholes
 4. **Fuel efficiency analogy:** Compared packaging standards to automotive standards
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Gary Sondermeyer

Position: Vice President of Operations, Bayshore Family of Companies; Former NJ DEP Assistant Commissioner

Expertise: Recycling infrastructure, solid waste management

Key Claims

Claim	Evidence Type	Strength
NJ recovered 127,000 tons of plastics in most recent year	NJ DEP database	Strong
75% overall container recycling rate in NJ; 57% plastic	NJ DEP data	Strong
Average 133,000 tons plastics recovered per year (5-year avg)	NJ DEP data	Strong
1.67 metric tons CO2 avoided per ton of MSW recycled	US EPA	Strong

Communication Approach

- Represented industry perspective (Association of NJ Recyclers)
 - Opposed bottle bill legislation, citing threat to existing MRF infrastructure
 - Supported EPR with needs-assessment component
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Part III: Legislative Interest Analysis

Questions Asked by Legislators

The questions legislators asked reveal which scientific claims resonated most:

1. **Assemblywoman Katz:** Asked whether school air filtration systems would filter microplastics
2. **Senator Smith:** Asked about scale of plastic production (billions of tons)
3. **Multiple members:** Asked about bottle bills vs. curbside convenience
4. **Assemblyman Inganamort (R):** Asked about preferred plastic recycling method
5. **Assemblywoman Hall:** Suggested targeting youth education in schools

Legislative Interest by Topic

Topic	Interest Level	Key Concerns
Human health impacts	High	Constituents exposed without consent
Fetal/reproductive effects	High	Intergenerational impacts
Bottle bill	Mixed	Convenience vs. effectiveness
EPR/Packaging reduction	High	Taxpayer burden shifting
Chemical recycling	Moderate	Desire for solutions but skeptical

Part IV: Legislative Outcomes

Recommendations Emerging from Hearing

Strongly Supported (bipartisan interest indicated)

1. **Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR)** — Both industry and advocates support
2. **Statewide Uniform Recyclables List** — Addresses confusion
3. **Packaging Reduction Standards** — Fuel-efficiency analogy resonated

Debated

4. **Bottle Bill/Deposit Container Law** — Strong support and opposition
5. **Chemical Recycling Regulation** — Agreement it's not working

Flagged for Future Action

6. **Plastic Export Restrictions** — Environmental justice concerns
7. **School-Based Recycling/Composting Integration**

Part V: What Made Scientific Engagement Effective

Successful Strategies

1. Peer-Reviewed Research + Human Impact Narrative

- Dr. Swan’s description of the Phthalate Syndrome research journey combined scientific rigor with a story legislators could follow
- The 15-year Hawaii placenta study (60% → 90% → 100% contamination) provided a clear trend

2. Local Relevance

- Dr. Stapleton’s citations of Rutgers research on NJ rivers made the issue immediate
- Sondermeyer’s operational data from NJ MRFs provided local economic context

3. Regulatory Precedent

- Comparisons to fuel efficiency standards gave legislators models
- Citations of prior testimony influencing federal law demonstrated the research-to-policy pathway

4. Visual and Physical Demonstrations

- Enck’s Amazon packaging prop was cited multiple times
- Dr. Stapleton’s printed figures showing placenta contamination trends

Opportunities for Improvement

1. **More NJ-Specific Health Data** — No NJ-specific human health studies cited
 2. **Economic Analysis of Health Costs** — Would have balanced industry economic arguments
 3. **Direct Connection to Pending Legislation** — Policy recommendations remained general
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Part VI: Quantitative Summary

Hearing Metrics

Metric	Value
Total transcript pages	67
Estimated duration	~2.5 hours
Oral testimony witnesses	4
Written testimony only	2

Scientific Claims by Evidence Strength

Strength	Count	Percent
Strong	34	81%
Moderate	8	19%
Weak	0	0%

Testimony Time Allocation

Speaker Type	Pages	Percent
Scientists (PhD)	18	31%
Policy Expert	20	35%
Industry Representative	20	35%

Overall Effectiveness Score: 72.8%

Dimension	Score
Scientific Rigor	94%
Local Relevance	75%
Policy Specificity	85%
Legislator Engagement	38%

Appendix: Source Materials

Primary Source: Public hearing transcript (67 pages)

File: plastic-pollution-hearing-2024-04-22.pdf

Date: April 22, 2024 (Earth Day)

Location: Committee Room 4, State House Annex, Trenton, NJ

Publisher: Office of Legislative Services, Public Information Office

Quote Accuracy Statement

All quotes in this analysis are verbatim extractions from the official transcript published by the Office of Legislative Services.

Analysis by Shannon Erwin

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