

Can a Push for Corporate Disclosure Save Us From Our Plastics?

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Using investors—or potential investors—to put the squeeze on plastic abuse may be a powerful wave of the future.

The brains and moneybags at last week's [Clinton Global Initiative](#) in New York City—an annual conference former President Bill Clinton has cooked up to bring world leaders and investors together to fund innovative ideas—announced a new effort dubbed the [Plastic Disclosure Project](#) (PDP).

Former President Bill Clinton helped start a global push to wave goodbye to plastic misuse. (Photo: Lucas Jackson/Reuters)

The PDP's goal: To sign up corporations around the globe to participate in annual surveys showing just how much plastic they're using and where it goes.

Initiated by a trio of groups with futuristic names and acronyms—[Project Kaisei](#), [ASrIA](#) (Association for Sustainable and Responsible Investment in Asia) and [HKUST](#) (Hong Kong University of Science and Technology)—the PDP is modeled after the 10-year-old [Carbon Disclosure Project](#) (CDP), which tracks corporate efforts to reduce contributions to climate change.

The CDP is a great model. It includes 2,500 organizations in 60 countries, which measure and disclose their greenhouse gas emissions and climate change strategies with a goal of reducing the former and growing the latter. Its reports are shared with 534 institutional investors, which hold \$64 trillion in assets under management and some 60 purchasing organizations, including Cadbury, PepsiCo and Wal-Mart.

The plastics issue is as urgent and daunting as climate change. Statistics are hardly encouraging:

- More than 7 million tons of garbage reaches the marine environment every year, according to the United Nations Environmental Programme ([UNEP](#)).
- Most plastic is not biodegradable and decomposition can take hundreds of years.
- Less than 15 percent of plastic gets recycled (if that much).

The PDP is meant to “expose”—in a mostly positive light—how companies are both using and reducing the use of plastic. From an investor's standpoint, the survey will highlight how companies are looking for ways to save money, design with less plastic, and reduce its use to improve the environment, health and bottom line. Sponsors hope to begin the surveys during the first half of 2011.

Credit Suisse/Asia is one of the first companies to sign on to the PDP. “As an incredibly versatile material, plastic is ubiquitous, but its improper disposal also makes it a major contributor to coastal zone and marine pollution,” said Ben Ridley, the company’s head of sustainability affairs.

[The American Chemistry Council](#)—the lobbying group for plastic makers—suggests that plastic reduces energy use when used in packaging, auto parts, electronics and building and construction, thus generating far fewer greenhouse gas emissions.

Project Kaisei is a 2-year-old ocean cleanup initiative based in San Francisco and Hong Kong. It launched a relationship with CGI with its “Rethinking Waste” program in 2010, which is dedicated to finding solutions to ocean plastic debris. The group's over-arching mission includes studying the trends and causes of water pollution, leading the coordination of large-scale cleanup initiatives to eliminate floating garbage patches, and proactively educating consumers on prevention and conservation.

Last summer, accompanied by researchers from the University of Hawaii, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration ([NOAA](#)) and [Ocean](#)

[Conservancy](#), the Kaisei team made its second expedition to the [North Pacific Gyre](#), home to one of the planet's worst collections of plastic.

Based on those expeditions, and an introduction at CGI, Kaisei has teamed with [Covanta Energy](#), a Fairfield, New Jersey, renewable energy holding company, sharing a goal of collecting plastic from the North Pacific Gyre and turning it into fuel.

The idea is for Project Kaisei to collect debris that Covanta will use to develop new waste-to-fuel technologies. They hope to convert 50 tons of marine debris into renewable energy each year.

Quick Study: [Plastic Consumption](#)