

PUBLIC POLICY

Kennedy wants HHS focus on microplastics in food supply

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Charlotte, N.C. — Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. said he's considering major changes in how food packaging is regulated, and he wants more focus on human health risks from microplastics and chemicals used in polymers.

While some details remain unclear, Kennedy used a speech at an April 23 chemical policy conference to say he will elevate concerns over health risks from plastics exposure within agencies under HHS control, including the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. He painted the plastics worries as one part of a wide-ranging effort to reduce high rates of chronic disease as part of the Make America Healthy Again Commission that President Donald Trump created in a February executive order and that he tapped Kennedy to lead.

But Kennedy also repeatedly zeroed in on microplastics and chemicals used in plastics in his speech at the Chemicals of Concern Policy Summit, organized by the Ocean Plastics Leadership Network, held April 22-23 in Charlotte.

"Microplastics and chemicals from food production, assembly lines and packaging not only end up in our food, they also contaminate our soil, our water, our oceans, and from there, they re-enter the food supply," he said.

Kennedy called on companies to work with the federal government to address public concerns over health effects from exposure to plastic chemicals and called for changes in packaging.

"Consumers are not going to stop worrying about phthalates or microplastics," he said. "We can ride the wave of global consumer demand for safe, sustainable products and packaging."

Kennedy links microplastics, disease

In his remarks, Kennedy pointed to studies linking microplastic exposure to health harms, even if he said more information is needed.

"We don't know the effects of microplastics in the human body, but we have disturbing studies that link microplastics to cancer, dementia and reproductive problems," Kennedy said.

He outlined a six-point agenda of changes for approving chemicals in food and in packaging, such as revising FDA's "GRAS" approval process for chemicals generally recognized as safe and giving more weight to evaluating cumulative chemical exposures.

Kennedy said HHS would develop protocols to reassess previously approved chemicals for food packaging and added to food and expanded safety assessments for endocrine and neuro-behavioral effects.

He acknowledged he could be



From left: HHS Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. on a panel with Dave Ford, head of OPLN; Jane Warner, managing director of the Food Packaging Forum; John Warner, CEO of The Technology Green; and Marcus Eriksen, co-founder of Sýres; and Leo Trasande, professor at New York University. Plastics News Staff

making some packaging and food executives in the audience uncomfortable, even as he called on industry to work with the agency.

"I bet some of you feel uncomfortable as I mentioned microplastics or food additives," he said. "You think that the next thing I'm going to do is blame the petroleum industry or the food industry or the packaging industry. I wish it was that cut and dry."

Kennedy said he wants to work with industry on changes.

"It won't be easy to change an entire system that is poisoning America," he said. "I don't want to drag industry kicking and screaming. I want to ask for your alliance."

Industry seeks details

One plastics industry group attending the summit said it wants to see more details of Kennedy's plans and also wants to work with him. "While we don't know the details behind Secretary Kennedy's announcement today, we look forward to working with HHS to advance sound science and smart policies that contribute to a healthier America," the American Chemistry Council said.

Several ACC executives spoke at the event, where they argued the plastics and chemicals used in consumer products are tightly regulated by both FDA and the Environmental Protection Agency.

"They're actually extremely well-regulated substances," said Ross Eisenberg, ACC's vice president of plastics, speaking before Kennedy's remarks. "Frankly, the chemical industry is the most heavily regulated manufacturing subsector in the economy right now. And that's good."

Microplastics has been a long-time issue for Kennedy. In a September 2023 op-ed, when he was running for president as a Democrat, he said President Joe Biden had failed to confront plastics pollution and that toxic chemicals in plastics packaging can cause cancer and birth defects.

As well, in a March 2023 edition of his podcast called *The*

Defender, where he interviewed environmentalist Marcus Eriksen, Kennedy worried chemicals used in plastics, including endocrine disruptors, were contributing to early sexual maturity in children.

Questioning environmental cuts

One environmental group speaking at the summit said HHS could have a positive impact on addressing plastics health concerns, but it also criticized the Trump administration for slashing environmental regulations broadly.

"I believe that courageous, science-based actions taken by HHS can have enormous benefits for our health," said John Hovevar, oceans campaign director for Greenpeace. "I'll admit, though, that it is hard to give this administration any kind of benefit of the doubt right now."

"Trump has essentially handed the EPA to the petrochemical lobby," Hovevar said before Kennedy spoke. "The agency is bleeding staff and gutting regulations and enforcement, canceling research grants and even going as far as encouraging companies to apply for 'presidential exemptions' to pollution limits."

Kennedy is also cutting HHS staff. He announced a plan March 27 to reduce the agency's workforce by 10,000 people. Combined with earlier reductions, an HHS statement said the agency's full-time employee count would be reduced from 82,000 to 61,000.

One microplastics researcher at the summit questioned how the federal government would meet demands for increased knowledge at the same time as it was cutting federal research funding.

Susanne Brander, an associate professor at Oregon State University, said she happened to learn as she was at the summit on April 23 that one of her lab's EPA grants, for pesticide health research, was being terminated, along with grants for other colleagues.

"It was difficult to process the



U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. speaking April 23 at the Chemicals of Concern Policy Summit.

fact that [Kennedy's] in support of learning more and limiting exposure to pollutants that harm our health but at the same time [is] part of an administration that is cutting the grants that allow for us to generate that knowledge," said Brander, who noted she agreed with Kennedy's focus on chronic disease and chemical exposure.

She also noted that Kennedy, in his speech, specifically cited a study she worked on that found microplastics and microfibers in 99 percent of commercial seafood.

Kennedy seeks greener packaging

At several points during his remarks at the summit, Kennedy said he welcomed input on what chemicals and regulations the agency should look at. He said he wanted to help the industry and had an open door, and he asked for nongovernmental organizations to send specific ideas.

"If you're an NGO, you should be combing through the FDA regulations and looking for places that I can act through the regulatory process," Kennedy said.

Besides his speech, Kennedy

appeared on a panel with public health advocates and held closed-door meetings with some participants at the summit, which was held at Atlantic Packaging Corp.'s technical center in Charlotte.

At one point in his 20-minute speech, Kennedy also said other packaging substrates also contain toxic chemicals and that companies should consider glass packaging. "I've talked a lot about plastics, but I don't want to single them out," he said. "Toxic chemicals are a problem in other types of packaging, too."

Kennedy noted returnable beverage container systems were prevalent when he was a child and that artificial intelligence sorting technology could help make recycling of glass containers more viable.

"I think we should take a serious second look at glass; it's probably the safest packaging material," he said as he called for broad changes in packaging.

"You can incentivize industry to invest in sustainable packaging solutions that are nontoxic, recyclable, compostable and [to] prevent new harmful chemicals from entering the market," he said.

Kennedy's appearance at the summit came a day after HHS and FDA unveiled another food chemical regulatory change: an agreement with the food industry to voluntarily phase out eight widely used petroleum-based food dyes.

"Nobody wants to eat petroleum," Kennedy told a room of reporters and health advocates at that Washington event April 22.

At the OPLN summit, Kennedy declined to answer questions from a reporter.

It's not clear what the next steps are with the food packaging initiative but he suggested in his speech it would be a priority, saying "things are going to change, and they're going to change dramatically over the next four years."

"We are disrupting this agency," Kennedy said. "Listening to me today: If you think we're not serious about this, you're making a bad judgment."