

Plastic Pollution/U.S. EPA Office of Research and Development Initiatives: Office of Inspector General Report



Walter Wright, Jr.
wwright@mwlaw.com
(501) 688.8839

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The United States Environmental Protection Agency (“EPA”) Office of Inspector General (“OIG”) issued a January 6th Report titled:

Office of Research and Development Initiatives to Address Threats and Risks to Public Health and the Environment from Plastic Pollution Within the Waters of the United States (“Report”)

See *Report* No. 21-N-0052.

The *Report* was transmitted from Sean W. O’Donnell of the OIG to Jennifer Orme-Zavaleta, Principal Deputy Assistant Administrator for Science and EPA Science Advisor, Office of Research and Development.

OIG stated that it initiated the audit to:

. . . identify the extent to which the EPA’s existing Clean Water Act programs and Office of Research and Development research initiatives address threats and risks to public health and the environment from plastic pollution within the waters of the United States.

By way of background, the *Report* states in regards to plastic debris that worldwide more than 29 million metric tons of plastic enter the environment each year. Also noted is the degradation of such plastics over hundreds of years into particles smaller than five millimeters which are described as microplastics. Microplastics are stated to account for approximately 90 percent of the plastic in the ocean.

The *Report* addresses the functions of EPA’s Office of Research and Development and identifies its activities related to the role of microplastics in the environment.

As to EPA’s research to date into plastics and associated environmental issues, OIG states that the Office of Research and Development:

. . . has not yet conducted enough research to determine risks to public health and the environment from plastic exposure.

Prior activities by EPA are discussed including the agency’s identification of a range of research needs for determining the human health and environmental risks of microplastics. Those research needs are stated to include:

- Establishing precise methods for analysis.
- Conducting research on sources, transport, fate, and distribution in the environment.
- Creating standardized toxicity tests.
- Creating methods and conducting research to characterize human exposure and impacts.

In addition three priority areas for microplastics research referenced by EPA include:

- Develop methods to determine the quantity of microplastics in the environment.
- Investigate the human health effects caused by drinking water containing microplastics.
- Determine the effects of microplastic exposure to aquatic species.

A copy of the OIG Report can be downloaded [here](#).