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The plastics problem is getting harder to solve

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Good morning.

“Plastic is my passion.” So says Surendra Patawari, Zooming with me yesterday from Belgium, where his giant global recycling company is based. I spoke with him about the state of plastics recycling, and it was not an encouraging conversation.

I’ve [noted in this column before](#) that an increasing number of big companies are targeting plastic recycling as an important goal. The Alliance to End Plastic waste includes companies like Dow, [Pepsi](#), P&G and ExxonMobil, who have committed \$1.5 billion to solving the plastics problem, and I believe they are sincere in their ambitions. Patawari, who sits on the board of the Alliance, believes they are sincere as well.

But here’s the thing: plastics recycling has pretty much collapsed. That was happening even before the pandemic, after China made its decision to stop importing plastic refuse for recycling. And it has gotten worse, in part because collapsed oil prices have made virgin plastic less expensive, and in part because other countries are regulating waste shipments, causing trade in plastic for recycling to shrivel. While companies like Pepsi and [Unilever](#) have set goals of using 25% recycled plastic packaging by 2025, Patawari says in fact only 16-17% of plastic is recycled now, and the percentage will decline next year. His industry “won’t be able to produce the quality and quantity of recycled plastic” those big companies need to meet their goals.

Meantime, in part because of the pandemic, the use of plastics is soaring—with discarded face masks and gloves adding to the refuse. “We cannot live without plastics. COVID 19 has proven that,” Patawari says. But unless the current broken system is fixed, waste will continue to accumulate, and clog the oceans. And while many big companies have gotten religion on the topic, this is an issue that ultimately will require government action to find its solution.

Speaking of broken—the airline industry in the U.S. is certainly in a world of hurt, with passenger volumes down 90% and only faint signs of recovery. But *Fortune’s* Shawn Tully [crunches the numbers and concludes](#) there is a way for the Big Four to survive.

And for those of you thinking of changing careers, here’s one with big growth prospects: [bankruptcy attorney](#).

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