

## The \$100K Earth Prize 2026: 17-year-old in Puerto Rico named North America Winner for biodegradable seaweed fabric



- The Earth Prize is the world's largest environmental competition and 'ideas incubator' for 13-19-year-olds, empowering young people with mentorship and \$100K funding
- 17-year-old North America Winner Helena do Rego created biodegradable fabric from overabundant seaweed for short-use flip-flops, beach or spa products
- Seven Winners will be announced each day this week, representing the regions of North America, Africa, Asia, Central and South America, Oceania and Southeast Asia, Europe and the Middle East
- Each team receives \$12.5K to develop and implement their idea for real life impact
- A public vote opens soon to crown the Global Winner on 29 May

GENEVA, Switzerland, 16 May - In an effort to tackle marine pollution and textile waste, 17-year-old Helena do Rego in Puerto Rico has been named as the North America Winner of [The Earth Prize 2026](#). Her solution, *SargaTex PR*, transforms overabundant sargassum seaweed into a biofabric designed for short-use items like flip-flops and spa footwear, offering



a biodegradable alternative to the disposable plastic products commonly used in beaches and tourist settings.

Helena has seen firsthand how sargassum seaweed has increasingly overwhelmed local beaches in Puerto Rico, creating strong odours and making them unusable for local communities. Looking for a way to repurpose this growing environmental burden, she began exploring how it could be transformed into a useful material, leading her to develop a biofabric that could replace synthetic textiles.

Puerto Rico currently faces two converging environmental challenges: in 2025 alone, over [40 million metric tons](#) of sargassum seaweed washed ashore, while the island's landfills, already operating at [85% capacity](#), receive around 250 million pounds of textile waste annually, with only around 9–12% recycled. Meanwhile, synthetic fabrics shed large volumes of microplastic fibres during washing, contributing significantly to ocean pollution.

SargaTex PR has already developed early prototypes using locally sourced materials like cranberry juice and coffee grounds, producing biofabric that biodegrades within weeks.

With support from The Earth Prize, Helena aims to further develop the biofabric using university lab facilities, including at the University of Puerto Rico. She also plans to work with local organisations such as Scuba Dogs to scale sargassum collection, while exploring partnerships with beach shops and sustainable tourism businesses to bring products like flip-flops and accessories to market.



*Helena do Rego in the lab with teacher Daniel Martinez. Photo by Gabriela Bolinaga*

Helena explained further:

*“Seeing how sargassum was taking over our beaches made me realise how urgent the problem had become. Winning The Earth Prize gives me the chance to further develop SargaTex PR and scale a solution that turns waste into materials that are better for both people and the planet.*

Now in its fifth year, The Earth Prize has reached over 21,000 students across 169 countries and territories. Previous winners have been featured in leading international media including Forbes, Business Insider (US and Africa), The Irish Times, and UN Today, with several teams advancing their ideas through patents and corporate partnerships.

The Earth Prize is run by The Earth Foundation, a non-profit based in Geneva, Switzerland, founded during the School Strike for Climate in 2019. At a time when climate anxiety affects a majority of young people - [59%](#) reporting they are very or extremely worried about the environment - the Prize provides a pathway from concern to action, equipping students with the tools to develop tangible, real-world solutions.



**Peter McGarry, Founder of The Earth Foundation**, commented on this year's competition: *"The Earth Prize winners 2026 represent seven outstanding teams across seven global regions, each tackling environmental challenges with distinct and impactful solutions. Once again, these young innovators demonstrate that age is no barrier to meaningful change. Their work reflects a powerful combination of creativity, determination and a deep understanding of the communities they serve."*

Public voting for the Global Winner opens on Monday 18 May, the day after the final Regional Winner is announced. Cast your vote on The Earth Prize website: [www.theearthprize.org/vote](http://www.theearthprize.org/vote).

### **About The Earth Prize**

[The Earth Foundation](#) is a Geneva-based non-profit that empowers, educates and inspires young people to tackle environmental challenges. Founded in response to the 2019 student-led climate rallies, it launched its flagship initiative, [The Earth Prize](#), the world's largest environmental competition and 'ideas incubator' for young people. The competition aims to inspire and empower the next generation of environmental innovators, supporting participants with the tools they need to develop eco solutions for real-world impact, including one-on-one mentoring, learning resources and \$100,000 shared funding for the winners. Since 2019, The Earth Prize has reached over 21,000 students across 169 countries and territories, and awarded over \$500,000.

Impact PDF: <https://tinyurl.com/tep2026>