

REDUCING SINGLE-USE PLASTICS, LITTER, & MARINE DEBRIS IN VIRGINIA

Elly Boehmer // Environment Virginia // eboehmer@environmentvirginia.org
 Jim Deppe // Lynnhaven River NOW // jim@lrnow.org
 Katie Register // Clean Virginia Waterways of Longwood University // registerkm@longwood.edu

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Building on the growing concern and increased willingness to take action to decrease the amount of plastic waste in Virginia’s environment, now is the time to craft policies and laws that will keep man-made waste out of Virginia’s streams, rivers, and coastal waters. We can do this by eliminating the most harmful types of mismanaged waste, incentivizing sustainable disposal of what we do use, and prioritizing funding to shift to sustainable and reusable products.

CHALLENGE

Our society produces plastic packaging, beverage containers, and food-wrappers designed to be used once and then “thrown away”. Most discarded materials are then landfilled or incinerated, creating pollution and requiring producers to extract more natural resources to make new materials.¹ When mismanaged, trash ends up in the environment.

Virginia’s natural landscapes and waterways are paying the price. Wildlife – including turtles, birds, fish, mammals, and important water-filtering bivalves like oysters and mussels – often mistake plastic items for food, can be entangled in debris, or displaced from their habitat.²

Eighty percent of debris in the oceans comes from land: mis-managed waste, litter, illegal dumping, and uncovered trucks.³ Most of the litter in Virginia comes from single-use food- and beverage-related items followed closely by cigarette butts and plastic grocery bags (see “Top Ten Items”).⁴

Eighty percent of debris in the oceans come from land: mis-managed waste, litter, illegal dumping, and uncovered trucks.

Rank	Item	Percent
1	Cigarette Butts	15%
2	Beverage Bottles (Plastic)	11%
3	Grocery Bags (Plastic)	10%
4	Food Wrappers (Candy, Chips, etc.)	10%
5	Beverage Cans	7%
6	Other Plastic Bags	5%
7	Bottle Caps (Plastic)	5%
8	Cups & Plates (Plastic and Foam)	4%
9	Beverage Bottles (Glass)	4%
10	Straws, Stirrers	3%

Top Ten Items, 2019 Statewide Cleanups in Virginia

Image credit: Clean Virginia Waterways of Longwood University

Single-use plastic production, consumption, and disposal, in particular, disproportionately affects communities of color, low-income communities, and Indigenous communities⁵ by polluting the air, water, and soil. Exposure to plastic additives and related toxins can have negative biological effects on humans and wildlife.⁶

We have long relied on a broken recycling system and local stewards to keep Virginia’s land and waters litter free. This approach has proven to be insufficient in action, funding, and impact as it does little to reduce single-use products or to hold producers responsible.

Virginia has made some progress: in 2021, Virginia banned single-use foam cups and take out containers, intentional balloon releases, and single-use products in state agencies and public colleges and universities.

SOLUTION

To protect our waterways and ocean from plastic pollution, we need to eliminate harmful single-use plastics, require producers to build and support a robust recycling system, and invest in programs to prevent and remove litter from our waterways and environment.

STATEWIDE BAG BILL

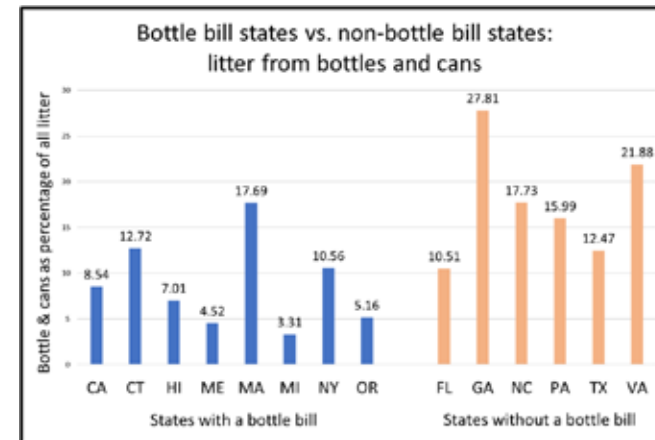
In order to effectively decrease litter, and contingent on the implementation of local enactment of fees on single-use plastic bags, consider uniform action on the state level to reduce single-use bags (as was supported by the Virginia Food Industry Association in 2020).

PRODUCER RESPONSIBILITY

Producers and fast-food restaurants that depend entirely on single-use food and beverage packaging should be responsible for the costs of litter clean ups, recycling, and waste disposal. Virginia should incentivize and encourage producers to create and use products that are truly reusable, biodegradable, and/or easier to recycle.

BOTTLE BILL

In Virginia, bottles and cans account for nearly 22% of all litter (see chart below from Clean Virginia Waterways).⁷ A proven way to reduce this is to establish a beverage container deposit program (“bottle bill”). Bottle bills, which rely on deposits to incentivize consumers and retailers,



not only reduce litter – they also increase recycling, reduce energy use, and curb greenhouse gas emissions.⁸ In states with container deposit bills, bottles and cans account (on average) for 8.69% of the total litter – significantly less than in Virginia.⁹

RAISING THE LITTER TAX

Virginia (population 8.5 million) generated \$1,864,527 from the Virginia Litter Taxes in Fiscal Year 2020. The fund included \$878,294 from the Litter Tax, \$769,390 from the Beer Tax, and \$216,842 from the Soft Drink Tax.¹⁰ That is low when compared to states with smaller populations. For example, Washington State (population 7.6 million) generates \$11.4 million annually from its litter tax.¹¹ As funds from the current Virginia Litter Tax are insufficient to cover the costs associated with prevention and removal of mismanaged solid waste, it should be raised.

CONCLUSION

Proven solutions exist that could measurably reduce plastic pollution and mis-managed solid waste in Virginia’s communities. Tackling plastic pollution will require new laws, support for behavior-change campaigns that encourage the reduction of single-use items, and litter removal efforts.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Establish a statewide beverage container deposit program (often referred to as a Bottle Bill).

Contingent on the implementation of local enactment of fees on single-use plastic bags, consider uniform action on the state level to reduce single-use bags.

Establish a producer stewardship program targeting single-use plastic packaging and products.

Raise the Virginia Litter Tax, and expand usage of funds to nonprofits which organize most of Virginia’s litter cleanups and public outreach campaigns.