

REDUCING PLASTIC WASTE

Elly Boehmer // Environment Virginia // eboehmer@environmentvirginia.org

Jim Deppe // Lynnhaven River NOW // jim@lrnow.org

Emily Foppe // Clean Fairfax // emily@cleanfairfax.org

Katie Register // Clean Virginia Waterways of Longwood University // registerkm@longwood.edu

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Eradicating plastic pollution is a top priority for many Virginians. Building on this concern, now is the time to craft policies and laws that will keep plastic waste out of Virginia's streams, rivers, and coastal waters. Waters polluted with plastic have negative health effects on humans and wildlife. We can further tackle plastic pollution in Virginia by eliminating the most harmful types of mismanaged waste, incentivizing sustainable disposal of what we do use, increasing producer responsibility, and encouraging the shift to sustainable and reusable products. Virginia has made progress to eliminate plastic pollution in previous years and further actions would continue this legacy.

CHALLENGE

Our society produces single-use plastic items that are discarded, creating pollution and further extraction of natural resources.¹ When mis-managed, trash ends up in Virginia's natural landscapes and waterways. The unintended consequences of single-use plastics result in devastating impacts on wildlife, including sea turtles, birds, fish, mammals, and important water-filtering bivalves like oysters and mussels through entanglement and ingestion.²

Eighty percent of debris in the oceans comes from land: mis-managed waste, litter, illegal dumping, and uncovered trucks (e.g., food- and beverage-related items, cigarette butts and plastic grocery bags).^{3,4} This mismanaged waste disproportionately affects historically disadvantaged communities as it disparately burdens BIPOC and communities of low wealth.⁵ Exposure to plastic additives have negative biological effects on humans and wildlife.⁶

Abandoned and derelict vessels (ADVs) obstruct navigational channels, cause harm to the environment, and

diminish commercial and recreational activities. ADVs, most of which are plastic material reinforced with glass fibers, also have negative financial impacts.

Our broken recycling system is insufficient in action, funding, and impact as it does not reduce single-use products nor does it hold producers responsible for the plastic pollution crises.

SOLUTION

PRODUCER RESPONSIBILITY

Responsibility for litter clean ups, recycling, and waste disposal should be shifted from taxpayers onto manufacturers. A producer responsibility program incentivizes manufacturers to decrease packaging, increase recycled content, and create recyclable, reusable, or biodegradable products. More and more states have established product stewardship programs where manufacturers pay for recycling and waste reduction, rather than taxpayers.

BEVERAGE CONTAINER DEPOSIT

In Virginia, bottles and cans account for nearly 22% of all litter; states with container deposits have significantly less.⁷ Beverage container deposits ("bottle bills") incentivize consumers to return containers for recycling. These proven programs increase recycling, while reducing litter, energy use, and greenhouse gas emissions.⁸

CONTINUED EFFORTS

In 2020 and 2021, Virginia made progress by passing a ban on single-use foam containers, banning intentional balloon releases, and increasing the litter tax. Additionally, eight localities used their new authority to put a fee on plastic bags. Challenges include: the 2022 General Assembly delayed the ban on foam plastic by five years. Virginia's litter tax is still inadequate, generating 40-80% less revenue than other states.⁹

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Ban the use of single-use expanded polystyrene by food vendors by 2024 rather than having a 7-year phase-out period.

Establish a producer responsibility program focused on a reduction in harmful packaging, where manufacturers pay for recycling and waste reduction, rather than taxpayers.

Establish a statewide beverage container deposit ("bottle bill").

Increase the Virginia Litter Tax to be based on volume of sales rather than a flat tax of \$20 per business, and index the rate to inflation so it adjusts periodically. Also, allow non-profit organizations access to the Litter Control & Recycling Fund.

Fund the Virginia Abandoned and Derelict Vessel Prevention and Removal Program at \$3 million for FY 2023-24.