

# REDUCING PLASTICS, LITTER, & MARINE DEBRIS

Elly Boehmer Wilson // Environment Virginia // eboehmer@environmentvirginia.org  
Zach Huntington // Clean Virginia Waterways // huntingtonza@longwood.edu

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Eradicating plastic pollution is a top priority for many Virginians. Smart policy can 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, and encouraging the shift to sustainable and reusable products. Virginia has made progress in eliminating 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.<sup>1</sup> When mismanaged, 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.<sup>2</sup>

Up to eighty percent of debris in the oceans comes from land: mismanaged waste, litter, illegal dumping, and uncovered trucks (e.g., expanded polystyrene, food- and beverage-related items, cigarette butts, and plastic grocery bags).<sup>3,4</sup> Studies show that mismanaged waste disproportionately affects historically disadvantaged and BIPOC communities.<sup>5</sup> Exposure to plastic additives have negative biological effects on humans and wildlife<sup>6</sup> with microplastics having been found in human lungs causing lesions and respiratory problems.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to on-land pollution sources, 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.

While recycling is important, without collection mandates, robust reporting, and required benchmarks, it does not reduce single-use products nor does it hold producers responsible for the plastic pollution crises.

## SOLUTION

### ELIMINATING HARMFUL PLASTICS

Low-quality, flimsy and single-use plastics such as foam, bags, and packaging are a challenge to manage due to their overabundance and material, both of which result in staggering amounts of mismanagement, unintentional litter, and plastic pollution. Eliminating the most harmful types of plastics through bans and reduction mandates is the best way to reduce pollution.

### EXTENDED PRODUCER RESPONSIBILITY (EPR)

A producer responsibility program incentivizes and/or requires manufacturers to decrease packaging; increase recycled content; and create recyclable, reusable, or biodegradable products. Manufacturers are required to reduce waste and pay for recycling infrastructure, rather than taxpayers.

### CLOSING THE WASTE LOOP

While the primary goal of extended producer responsibility programs is to reduce the use of the most harmful single-use plastics at the source, these programs also work to close the waste loop by requiring producers rather than taxpayers to be financially and/or physically responsible for their products' waste. One example of successful EPR is beverage deposit programs- Oregon's program had an 88.5% bottle recycling rate in 2022.<sup>8</sup> These programs best achieve waste reductions and high levels of recycling when they have strong collection mandates, benchmarks and reporting requirements.

### CLEANING UP PLASTIC POLLUTION

Our goal is to reduce plastic pollution at the source, but we must clean up what ends up in our environment. Virginia's Litter tax is one way this work is funded, but it generates the lowest revenue per capita of any state<sup>9</sup> - Virginia must implement policies to increase revenue in support of critical programs. The Commonwealth must continue funding programs that remove difficult marine debris such as fishing gear and abandoned and derelict vessels.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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

Establish an Extended Producer Responsibility program in Virginia code focused on reducing harmful packaging.

Adjust the litter tax for inflation every five years.

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