

# ELIMINATING PLASTIC POLLUTION

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## WHY IT MATTERS

Eradicating plastic pollution is one of the most pressing concerns for registered Virginia voters.<sup>1</sup> Waters polluted with plastic have negative health effects on humans, wildlife, and the economy.

Our society produces single-use plastic items that are discarded, creating pollution and further extraction of natural resources.<sup>2</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>3</sup> Plastic pollution harms economic activity, lowers property values,<sup>4</sup> reduces tourism,<sup>5</sup> and decreases spending at local businesses.<sup>6</sup>

Plastics disproportionately impact environmental justice communities at every stage, from oil extraction and plastic production emissions in vulnerable communities to the impacts of pollution on health and local economies. This mismanaged waste disproportionately burdens BIPOC and communities of low wealth.<sup>7</sup>

Up to 80% of debris in the ocean comes from land: mismanaged waste, litter, illegal dumping, and uncovered trucks (e.g., food- and beverage-related items, cigarette butts and plastic grocery bags, tires, etc.). Shipping, boating, and fishing activities are also sources of marine debris.<sup>8,9</sup> As plastics break down, rather than biodegrading, they become microplastics. Microplastics end up in our drinking water and food chain. It is estimated that humans ingest approximately a credit card's worth of plastic every week.<sup>10</sup> Exposure to plastic additives has negative biological effects on humans and wildlife.<sup>11</sup> Recent studies suggest that microplastics are a potential risk factor for cardiovascular disease.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, studies stress that there are thousands of chemicals used to make plastic products that are known carcinogens, endocrine disruptors, and neurotoxicants, but most products have alarmingly never been tested for toxicity.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to land-based pollution sources, **abandoned and derelict vessels (ADVs)**, most of which are plastic material reinforced with glass fibers, obstruct navigational channels, cause harm to the environment, and diminish commercial and recreational activities.

## CURRENT LANDSCAPE

Virginia has made progress in eliminating plastic pollution in previous years, such as banning single-use foam cups and take-out containers, prohibiting intentional balloon releases, and allowing localities to place a fee on single-use plastic bags.

Virginia's **Litter Tax** is paid by retailers and manufacturers whose products contribute to plastic pollution and marine debris. This revenue primarily funds the cleanup of litter that is already in the environment. Virginia's litter tax gen-

erates the lowest revenue per capita compared to all other states<sup>14</sup> and it is insufficient to be effective at cleaning up Virginia's litter and marine debris. At the same time, Virginia should not solely rely on cleaning up litter rather than preventing it in the first place.

Virginia's progress focuses on two of the three main parts of the overall solution: eliminating the most harmful sources and funding cleanups. Virginia has not yet improved the third: recycling infrastructure. As noted by the **Virginia Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ)**, "Most litter comes from post-consumer waste yet there is no clear information on how much post-consumer waste is recycled or landfilled. Metal and yard waste are heavier and more likely to be industrial than household waste so it skews how well consumers recycle."<sup>15</sup> As a result, recycling rates in Virginia are inflated. Only 4% of all plastic in Virginia is recycled, plastic bottles have an 8% recycling rate in Virginia,<sup>6</sup> glass bottles and jars have a 28% recycling rate, and aluminum cans have a 21% recycling rate. While these recycling rates are higher than plastic bottles, they are still significantly lower than in states with more effective systems.<sup>17</sup>

These low recycling rates are compounded by the lack of access to recycling in Virginia and the increasing cost of recycling programs. These increasing costs have forced 13 localities to end their curbside recycling programs since 2018, including large metropolitan areas like Chesterfield County and Chesapeake.<sup>18</sup>

## OPPORTUNITIES

Virginia has the opportunity to tackle plastic pollution through a variety of programs such as eliminating harmful mismanaged waste, incentivizing sustainable disposal, increasing producer responsibility, and shifting to sustainable and reusable products.

Low-quality, flimsy, and single-use plastics such as foam, bags, and packaging are a challenge to manage due to their overabundance and material. These single-use plastics create staggering amounts of mismanaged waste. Eliminating these types of plastics through bans and reduction mandates is proven to be the best way to reduce pollution.<sup>19</sup>

**Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR)** programs requires manufacturers to reduce waste and pay for recycling infrastructure, rather than taxpayers. It incentivizes a more efficient, productive waste system that decreases waste; increases recycled content; and creates recyclable, reusable, or biodegradable products.

Producer responsibility programs create a vibrant recycling industry by requiring producers to develop the systems needed to dispose of their products. This can reduce the financial burden faced by taxpayers and governments for the disposal and recycling of waste.

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One example of successful producer responsibility is **beverage deposit programs**. “Bottle bills” – another name for beverage deposit programs - put small deposit fees on beverage containers. When a customer recycles that container at a collection site, they receive their deposit back. Oregon’s program had an 88.5% bottle recycling rate in 2022.<sup>20</sup> These programs best achieve waste reductions and high levels of recycling when they have strong collection mandates, benchmarks, and reporting requirements.

These programs keep valuable materials in the market for longer. According to the 50 States of Recycling report,<sup>21</sup> producer responsibility programs in Virginia could increase recycling-related jobs from 3,600 to 11,000; place \$210 million of recycled material back in the market to support a circular economy and reduce the need for virgin material; and avoid emissions of 2.5 million metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent annually.

## TOP TAKEAWAYS

Eradicating plastic pollution is one of the most pressing concerns for registered Virginia voters.

Eliminating the most harmful types of plastics through bans and reduction mandates is proven to be the best way to reduce pollution.

A Virginia producer’s responsibility program would require manufacturers, rather than taxpayers, to reduce waste and pay for recycling infrastructure.

## ENDNOTES

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