



SUPPORT S.113 – ACTION ON SINGLE-USE PLASTICS

March 26, 2019

Dear Senator,

Single-use plastics – such as bags, cups, containers, straws and more – are a kind of pollution like we've never seen before. With a useful life that is often no more than 15 minutes, this plastic can last in the environment for 500 years or more.

Plastic doesn't biodegrade. Over time, it may instead break down into smaller and smaller bits called microplastic. Microplastics have been found in tap water around the world,¹ in 90% of bottled water,² in sea salt,³ beer,⁴ and in fish, shellfish and other forms of wildlife.⁵

Though plastics have been around for more than a century, widespread production didn't really take off until after World War II. According to National Geographic, about 9.2 billion tons of plastic have been produced since then. Most of that – 6.9 billion tons – has become waste. And of that, an incredible 6.3 billion tons never made it into a recycling bin.⁶

It's been said that we are drowning in plastic pollution and that is very nearly true. Global plastic production is increasing at an alarming rate. In fact, half of all the plastic ever made was produced in just the last 15 years. It's choking our oceans and waterways, fouling our environment, killing wildlife and threatening human health as well.

It's time to act. Communities across Vermont, throughout the country and around the world are taking a stand against single-use plastics.⁷ **In order to facilitate a fair and efficient transition away from some of the most common single-use plastics, we urge you to support S.113.**

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/sep/06/plastic-fibres-found-tap-water-around-world-study-reveals>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/mar/15/microplastics-found-in-more-than-90-of-bottled-water-study-says>

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/sep/08/sea-salt-around-world-contaminated-by-plastic-studies>

⁴ <https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/local/milwaukee/2018/05/14/tiny-bits-plastic-found-beer-samples-including-milwaukee/602644002/>

⁵ <https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2018/08/20/636845604/beer-drinking-water-and-fish-tiny-plastic-is-everywhere>

⁶ National Geographic magazine, June 2018, p. 46.

⁷ <https://www.vnews.com/Move-to-ban-single-use-plastic-bags-gaining-momentum-23960963>

There is no way to recycle our way out of the single-use plastics problem. Only a small fraction of the disposable plastic produced in this country has ever been recycled, and with increasing amounts being produced and recycling markets declining around the world, the numbers just don't add up.

The answer is to stop creating throwaway plastic waste wherever we can. S.113 uses a model that has worked in many other places. The legislation addresses three of the most ubiquitous forms of plastic pollution: single-use plastic bags, straws and expanded polystyrene (description below).

Bags

Under S.113, single-use plastic carryout bags would no longer be used by Vermont stores or food establishments. Single-use paper bags could still be provided at a cost of ten cents per bag. The charge collected on paper bags would remain with retailers.

Straws

Many restaurants and bars in Vermont have already moved away from the practice of placing a straw in their customers' beverages as a matter of course.^{8 9} Ben & Jerry's has recently announced plans to eliminate the use of plastic straws and other single-use plastics in its 600 Scoop Shops worldwide.¹⁰

S.113 would make plastic straws available only upon the request of customers in Vermont establishments. Individuals who need or want a straw would still be able to get one, but the use and disposal of most single-use straws would be avoided.

Expanded Polystyrene

No person would be allowed to sell expanded polystyrene (EPS) food service products or sell food or beverages in those same products under S.113. However, the law would not prohibit a person from storing or packaging a food or beverage in an EPS food service product for distribution out of State.

Already, more than 200 cities and counties around the country have banned or otherwise restricted the use of EPS food and beverage containers, including 16 towns in Maine, 30 towns in Massachusetts, New York City, Portland, Seattle, Minneapolis and San Francisco. State legislators in Maryland voted earlier this month to ban polystyrene foam containers. The bill now awaits the governor's signature.

Why Ban Expanded Polystyrene Food Packaging?

Toxic

- Out of the large array of plastics sold on the market, polystyrene foam is one of the most dangerous.
- Benzene—a carcinogen—is a building block of polystyrene and is released during manufacture and incineration, exposing workers and communities to dangerous toxic chemicals.
- EPS foam also contains styrene, a chemical linked to cancer, vision and hearing loss, impaired memory and concentration, and nervous system effects.
- Polystyrene quickly breaks down into small particles that are widely dispersed in the environment due to its light weight. These microplastics cause physical and neurological toxicity in smaller organisms.

Environmental impacts

- EPS foam lasts for at least 500 years in the environment. It pollutes our lakes and streams as well as our urban areas and open spaces.

⁸ <https://www.mychamplainvalley.com/news/vermont-restaurants-to-cut-back-on-plastic-straws/1269292984>

⁹ <https://www.vpirg.org/stop-single-use-plastics/straws/>

¹⁰ <https://vermontbiz.com/news/2019/january/28/final-straw-ben-jerrys-plans-eliminate-single-use-plastic>

- There are up to 57 chemical by-products released during the manufacturing of styrene.
- EPS foam is manufactured with HFCs (hydrofluorocarbons), a highly potent greenhouse gas that the Vermont Senate recently voted to ban (S.30).
- EPS foam cannot be recycled on a large scale even if it is recyclable in theory because it must be clean (i.e. no food residue) and clean foam cannot be collected curbside because it crumbles into small pieces.
- Because it breaks during the sorting process, polystyrene foam contaminates valuable recyclables.
- Polystyrene foam has no value as a raw material and cannot be sold for a profit after it is recycled.
- Recycling polystyrene foam is also energy intensive.

By dramatically cutting the use and disposal of single-use plastic bags, straws and expanded polystyrene food service products, Vermont will take a significant step toward reducing plastic pollution in our state. Such a move can also be a model for other states to follow as they consider their means of addressing this growing problem.

We encourage you to support S.113.

Paul Burns
Executive Director
VPIRG

Jen Duggan
Vice President and Director, CLF Vermont
Conservation Law Foundation

Judith Enck
Former EPA Regional Administrator
Founder, Beyond Plastics

Lauren Hierl
Executive Director
Vermont Conservation Voters

Christopher Miller
Global Activism Strategy Manager
Ben & Jerry's

Ashley Orgain
Global Director of Advocacy & Sustainability
Seventh Generation

Shaina Kasper
Vermont and New Hampshire State Director
Toxics Action Center

For more information, contact Paul Burns at pburns@vpirg.org or (802) 223-5221 x.12