



Banning Single-Use Plastics

Protecting Our Health and Oceans

We use plastic bags, straws and utensils, and foam cups and containers for just a few minutes before tossing them, and then they can pollute our environment for hundreds of years. We can protect our health and marine animals by banning or limiting these products, as hundreds of communities and nine states have already done.

The plastic waste crisis

- U.S. homes and businesses throw out enough plastic to fill a football stadium 1.5 times every day on average and that amount is increasing.¹
- Only 8% of this plastic is recycled – 92% is landfilled, incinerated or littered.
- Plastic products break down over hundreds of years into microplastic particles that persist and accumulate in the environment.

Plastic threatens marine animals

- Enough plastic enters the oceans every year to fill five grocery bags stacked on every foot of coastline around the world. This plastic is harming and killing marine animals in huge numbers by entangling them, blocking their digestive tracts, spreading disease and leaching harmful chemicals.
- All sea turtle species and nearly half of all seabird and marine mammal species have ingested plastic.
- The stomach contents of two dead whales that washed ashore in recent years contained 88 and 64 pounds of trash, respectively, mostly plastic.

Plastic threatens our health

- Microplastics have been found in the food we eat, the water we drink, and the air we breathe. A recent study estimates that humans could be ingesting up to a credit card's worth of microplastics every week.
- Some plastic additives and chemicals have been found to interfere with brain development and disrupt the hormone system, and some chemicals that cling to plastics can cause cancer and birth defects.

Solution: Ban single-use plastics

- We can't recycle our way out of this problem – most plastic can only be recycled a few times before it becomes too degraded.
- Nearly half (47%) of U.S. plastic waste is from single-use products and packaging. So banning and limiting plastic products like bags, foam cups and containers, straws, and utensils could significantly reduce plastic pollution.
- We don't need single-use plastics. There are plenty of readily recyclable, compostable and, better yet, reusable alternatives available.

Single-Use Foam Cup and Container Bans

Why ban foam cups and containers?

- Polystyrene foam – what most of us call Styrofoam – is the most frequently observed plastic litter in the ocean, and has even been found in remote corners of the Arctic.
- On average, U.S. homes and businesses throw out more than 5 million pounds of polystyrene cups, plates and other containers (both foam and not) every day.
- It is often impossible to recycle polystyrene or is more expensive than using new polystyrene, so only 0.4% was recycled in 2017. Worse yet, polystyrene can be missed by recycling sorters and contaminate what would otherwise be valuable recycling streams, such as paper.
- We don't need single-use polystyrene cups and containers – there are plenty of recyclable, compostable, and, better yet, reusable alternatives available.
- Polystyrene bans reduce waste. From 2008 to 2012, after the California cities of Santa Cruz and Pacific Grove banned polystyrene foam food containers, polystyrene litter on local beaches decreased by as much as 71%.

Current foam bans

261 towns, cities and counties have limited or banned single-use polystyrene cups and containers and the following three states have banned them:

- Maine
- Maryland
- Vermont



Floating garbage including a foam container and fragments.

Foam ban best practices and next steps

To ensure that foam cup and container bans effectively reduce waste, governments should enforce the requirement and establish fines for non-compliance. To increase the impact of foam bans, governments can also:

- Require that replacement single-use containers and lids be practically and economically recyclable or compostable at existing local facilities.
- Incentivize food establishments to replace foam containers with containers made from recycled content.
- Encourage dine-in establishments to provide reusable food containers – plates, bowls, cups, etc.
- Update laws to allow food establishments to use customers' reusable containers.
- Encourage food establishments to provide customers with reusable carry-out containers. Some businesses already do so and charge a deposit, which encourages customers to return the containers later.