

Plastic Pollution Crisis in Pennsylvania March 21, 2024 Q & A

Questions submitted as part of the registration process with answers shared by the presenter Kathy Cook, League of Women Voters.

General Statement & Call to Action: I am asking all of you to determine if your town is working on a single-use plastic bag ban. If you need help, contact your town supervisor and ask them to work on it. The League has resources to help townships working on this issue.

The Southeast PA plastic bag ban group meets every six weeks, and the Chester County plastic group meets every six weeks—but we have staggered the meetings so there are meetings roughly every three weeks. The Chester County group has the same resources as the Montgomery group—we work together, so if you can't make one meeting, you can perhaps make the other meeting. The meetings bring together people who have passed a ban and want to mentor others and those working on their bans and want information or help on issues they are presented with. I believe our League members can be instrumental in moving the single-use bag ban initiative forward.

If your township or borough has a single-use plastic ban, does it include Styrofoam, plastic tableware, and straws? Does your ordinance have a fee for bags? Does your county have an extended producer responsibility law?

Francine Locke is the Delaware County sustainability coordinator. She would welcome the League working on single-use plastic bag bans and other plastic pollution initiatives. **Delaware County Office of Sustainability** delcopa.gov/sustainability .

I am working with Rachel Griffith, the Chester County Sustainability coordinator, and she welcomes the help of Zero Waste initiatives such as bag bans.

I hope to present this webinar to other leagues. I would like to see the league create a group to educate our leagues about plastic and work on plastic bag bans across the state. Please let me know if you are interested in working on this issue. I work with PennEnvironment, Southeast Plastic Bag Ban Coalition, Move Past Plastics based in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, and several other groups.

If interested in getting involved in banning single use plastic bags contact Kathy Cook kathy.cook@palwv.org

Q. How is the effort to reduce plastic pollution in the US compared to what other countries are doing?

- A.** We are behind what some other countries are doing. The European Union first worked on a Circular Action Plan in 2018. It was adopted in 2020. It calls for new rules for recycling, increasing demand for recycled plastic content, curbing plastic waste, and research and development on greater recyclability and alternative materials to plastics. However, new research has just emerged from Greenpeace that shows that recycling plastic may be harmful.

Recycling increases the toxicity of plastics. Recycled plastics have been found to contain even higher levels of chemicals due to the need to add additional chemicals to the recycling process. I will add that report to the information you will receive from attending this webinar.

Q. What kind of reduction programs have been successful globally?

- A.** Reuse and refill programs are helping, but they aren't perfect. Laura's Refill Shop is at 2325 Pottstown Pike in Pottstown, and more refill shops are coming.

Circular economy action plans, such as in the European Union. We are now seeing sustainability directors in many of our counties, and they are working toward that model because they know it works.

www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/06/how-the-world-is-fighting-plastic-pollution/

Over 50 countries are actively working on reducing plastic pollution.

Q. Is there legislation at the national and PA and/or local levels to reduce plastic pollution?

- A. YES** - Legislators need to hear from constituents about what is important to them. Be vocal and contact your representatives. We need extended producer responsibility legislation in Pennsylvania, and we need to create a federal systemic change.

PA Legislation:

- HB 470 calls for a ban on single-use polystyrene- In House ERE committee
- HB 1191- Beverage bottle bill and can deposit-in House Environmental Resources and Energy Committee
- HB 1122 Keeping PFAS and plastics out of food—Christine Howard—bill in House Agriculture and Rural Affairs committee.
- HB 1001 Plastic Pollution Taskforce—in House Environmental Resources and Energy Committee
- HB 603 Chemical Classification and Clean-up –adds PFAS/PFOA to hazardous site clean-up.
- SB 144 Restricting PFAS in firefighting foam—this passed the Senate and is in the House Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness committee
- HB 1571-Restricting PFAS in firefighting gear—is I Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness in House.

NOTE: Track Pennsylvania Legislature – [CLICK HERE](#) – Search for bills, search for legislators, follow committee action, track bills by subscribing to account visit PA Legislation Notifications Sign-up: [Sign up for PaLegis Notifications - CLICK HERE](#). Subscribe for free with a Pa [Legis Notifications account](#) to receive the latest updates regarding legislation, including committee and floor activity.

US Legislation:

[Break Free From Plastic Pollution Act](#)—introduced in 2023

- Requiring big corporations to take responsibility for their pollution.
- Establishes aggressive source reduction targets for single-use plastic products and beverage containers.
- Creating a nationwide beverage container refund program, which has been successful in 10 states.
- Reducing and banning certain single-use plastic products that are not recyclable.
- Establishes grant programs to support reusable and refillable products.
- Pausing build-out of new plastic facilities until critical environmental justice and health protections are implemented.

[Farewell to Foam Act S3440](#)—prohibits the sale and distribution of expanded polystyrene food service ware, loose fill, and coolers

New York State--[The Extended Producer Responsibility bill](#) includes:

- Requires companies to gradually reduce their packaging by 50% over 10 years, which can be achieved by either eliminating packaging or switching to reuse and refill systems.
- Requires companies to transition 90% of their remaining packaging over 12 years to be either recyclable, compostable, or made of recycled content.
- Eliminates known toxic substances, including PFAS, mercury, lead, and formaldehyde, from packaging, making packaging safer for consumers and more recyclable.
- Transfers the responsibility for managing packaging waste from taxpayers to the companies that caused the problem, putting the economic burden where it belongs.
- Provides funding to local governments for waste reduction programs, recycling, and waste disposal through new fees, which are adjusted based on the environmental impacts of the packaging.
- Prohibits the burning of plastic and waste-to-fuel from being considered recycling, protecting communities from this new source of pollution.
- Includes accountability and enforcement mechanisms such as reporting and auditing requirements.
- Requires collecting and reporting data that will provide insight into local recycling and waste management systems.

Q. What plastics are recyclable, and what aren't? Are the recycled cans/plastics/paper collections actually recycled?

- A.** Only #1, #2 and sometimes #5, depending on the market for recycled plastic. That is roughly 5%- 6% of plastics. Remember, recycled plastic is higher in toxicity, so it doesn't really solve the problem.

Q. Are there existing practical methods for removing microplastics from public waterways?

- A.** According to a study published in Science of The Total Environment, a conventional drinking water treatment plant that uses sand and granular activated carbon (GAC) filters—the kind of filter that many water pitcher filters use—can remove nanoplastics by about 88.1 percent. Boiling and filtering water will reduce microplastics and nanoplastics by 90%.

There are some activated charcoal/epoxy systems for wastewater treatment, but I am not sure how expensive that is. Polyamide reverse osmosis filters contain plastic and can filter out some nanoplastics. Still, we also don't know the amount of toxins that are leached out from the filter and the amount of nanoplastics given off by these filters.

A lot of the research has potential if it can be scaled up to meet the demand and if it can be done economically. We are getting there, but we have more to do.

Q. Microplastic detected in water is linked to many illnesses and of particular concern to children. How can we focus more advocacy on protecting clean water? We need much more advocacy and education. We need to talk to more groups and get the message out.

A. We need to make some noise. Most importantly, we need to vote for people willing to take on these issues. We don't need more drilling in Pennsylvania; we need to transition to renewable energy.

Q. How can we influence Coca-Cola and other significant sources of plastic?

A. This is where Beyond Plastics and the League of Women Voters come in. Grassroots advocacy can move mountains if we get more people involved. Beyond Plastics groups to advocate for companies to reduce plastic use. We also need to find a legislative champion - Greg Vitalli, Caroline Committa, Danielle Friel Otten, Chris Rabb, and others to sponsor a bill.

Q. Why are people in power not responding to citizens with solutions to stop or prevent plastic pollution?

A. Like anything, it takes education and persistence. The oil/gas lobby is interested in keeping its market share. They spread lots of false narratives. One big false narrative is that moving to renewable energy will lose jobs here in Pennsylvania. This is not true. Jobs will transition. First of all, we are in a transition. Transitions slowly move, and we can't eliminate plastics because we don't have viable alternatives for certain plastic products. We need plastic blood bags and tubing for medical use. However, we don't need to buy as many plastic toys for our children or use so much plastic wrapping in our homes for our food. There are ways to use less plastic. We also have to value our health and the health of our environment over the almighty dollar.

Q. Is there any point in putting out plastics for recycling?

A. As I said, only #1,#2, and possibly #5s can be recycled. If you don't put them in the recycling bin or separate them—it will be easier for the Materials Recovery Facilities (MERFS). Reminder—NO plastic bags go in recycling bins because they clog up the sorting machines at the MERFs.

Q. What do we do about the plastic industry's studies that are spreading doubt and confusion around plastic bag bans?

A. Again, we need to write letters to the editor, educate the public, and spread awareness of the problem. I know the CDC League has done a great job discussing misinformation in politics, and we need to keep discussing all the misinformation in all types of voter education.

Q. Is there any list of reputable companies offering alternatives to plastic containers for everything currently sold in plastic?

A. I am now noticing more bar soap sold than body wash or soap packaged in plastic. Research and development is working on plastic alternatives from seaweed and bamboo. Glass is your best alternative for packaging. In the deli, we should return to the days when they packaged meats and cheeses in white paper.

Here are some suggestions for replacing plastic wrap.

- Bee's Wrap beeswax wraps
- ROSOS glass food storage containers
- Mason Jars
- Ecozied Vegan Reusable Food Wrap
- Poipoico Multipurpose Mesh Bags –however, their mesh is made out of polyester with plastic. So read the fine print.
- Anne Riggs Designs reusable bowl covers
- EcoHip Custom Designs Sandwich wraps
- Earth Hero earthhero.com/
- Meliora – cleaning, laundry detergent meliorameansbetter.com/
- Dirty Labs – bioenzyme laundry/dish detergent dirtylabs.com/collections/all
- Glad has a 50% plant-based plastic wrap
- Ziploc bags are the only sandwich bags with no PFAS

In 2006, for example, the Brazilian petrochemical company Braskem launched experiments to see if it could economically convert sugar into ethylene, the most important monomer in commodity plastic production. By 2010, Braskem was selling “fully biological” polyethylene plastic, or bio-PE.

The big upside of this material is that sugarcane will sequester carbon from the atmosphere as it grows. Since bio-PE is structurally indistinguishable from its synthetic twin, it has been easy to deploy in applications such as food packaging, cosmetics, etc.

But being chemically indistinguishable is also a problem. Since polyethylene does not appear in natural environments, few microbes have developed the ability to break its molecular bonds. Bio-PE, therefore, needs to do more to solve the waste problem. Just because something is “bioplastic,” in other words, does not mean it is inherently sustainable.

<https://www.sierraclub.org/sierra/quest-compostable-plastic>