MASSPIRG builds momentum toward zero waste

By Alex Truelove, Zero Waste campaign director with our national network

The United States has a waste problem. We make too much, reuse too little and replace our things with new ones too quickly—practices that have led to massive amounts of wasted material headed to landfills and polluting our environment.

With your support, MASSPIRG and our national network are campaigning for policies to tackle our waste problem. Here’s just some of the work you’ve helped make possible:

MASSPIRG urges Whole Foods to do its part to cut plastic pollution

Whole Foods isn’t living up to its planet-before-profit reputation—but bold action to cut its plastic footprint could change that and help address our plastic waste problem.

In November 2020, MASSPIRG launched a campaign calling for a commitment from Whole Foods to phase out single-use plastic packaging at its stores.

In June of last year, environmental group As You Sow gave the grocery chain an “F” for its policies on plastic packaging, material that contributes to the massive amounts of plastic waste overrunning our landfills, littering our communities and polluting our planet.

“As a company with a reputation for selling food that is good for people and the planet, Whole Foods can make a big dent in reducing plastic pollution,” said Alex Truelove, Zero Waste campaign director with our national network.

“Whole Foods Market once led the industry as the first U.S. grocer to eliminate plastic grocery bags at checkout in 2008. It’s time they lead again.”
More than 130 organizations joined our national research partners at U.S. PIRG Education Fund in sending a letter in March urging Whole Foods CEO John Mackey to commit to steps for reducing the company’s plastic waste.

25 states, including Massachusetts, pursue policies to secure consumers’ right to repair

Policies that reduce waste, increase consumer choice and save families money should be no-brainers—and, fortunately, more states are beginning to see it that way.

Thanks in large part to the advocacy of our national network and coalition partners, 2021 is shaping up to be a big year for state legislation to guarantee consumers the right to fix their stuff. As the year began, 25 states—including Massachusetts—introduced bills that would lower manufacturer restrictions on service information, tools, parts and diagnostic software that consumers and independent repair shops need to make repairs.

The movement’s new momentum has major implications for our country’s waste crisis. Americans get rid of 416,000 cell phones per day, and only 15 to 20 percent of electronic waste is recycled. That could change if consumers were more empowered to extend the lives of their broken devices by taking them to the repair shop of their choice.

“We imagine a different kind of system, where instead of throwing things out, we reuse, salvage and rebuild,” said Nathan Proctor, our national network’s Right to Repair campaign director.

Making the case for zero waste, and pushing for a plan to get there

For years, MASSPIRG has been pushing for a “reduce first” approach to moving the Bay State toward a zero-waste future. And we made some key progress in 2020.

Along with the Zero Waste MA Coalition, we’ve been advocating for the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) to issue a Zero Waste 2020-2030 Master Plan as part of the Solid Waste Master Plan (SWMP) that it publishes every 10 years. MASSPIRG helped pass the law that created the SWMP in the 1980s, and now we’re looking to drive even bolder action on tackling our waste crisis.

We also helped convince the DEP to hold an additional set of public hearings so that Bay Staters could make their voices heard on this issue—and more than 100 people showed up to four Zoom hearings held between July and September.

Finally, in December we issued a report entitled “Garbage in Massachusetts,” describing the pollution, the waste of money, and the public health threats posed by the two dozen landfills and incinerators in Massachusetts.

Clockwise from top left: Olivia Sullivan, Zero Waste campaign associate with our national network; Jessica Schreiber, CEO and founder of FABSCRAP; author and journalist Elizabeth L. Cline; and Brooke Roberts-Islam, senior contributor at Forbes, discussed textile waste during a webinar hosted by U.S. PIRG.

MASSPIRG’s Mission

When consumers are cheated or the voices of ordinary citizens are drowned out by special interest lobbyists, MASSPIRG speaks up and takes action. We uncover threats to public health and well-being and fight to end them, using the time-tested tools of investigative research, media exposés, grassroots organizing, advocacy and litigation. MASSPIRG’s mission is to deliver persistent, results-oriented public interest activism that protects consumers, encourages a fair, sustainable economy, and fosters responsive, democratic government.

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New law will protect families and firefighters from harmful flame-retardant chemicals

Massachusetts closed out 2020 with a landmark ban on toxic flame retardants, which threaten the health of consumers and firefighters while doing little to inhibit fires.

On Jan. 1, Gov. Charlie Baker signed the Children and Firefighters Protection Act into law. The act bans 11 flame retardants in children’s products, mattresses, household furniture, carpeting and window coverings, and gives the Department of Environmental Protection the authority to ban additional chemicals that are hazardous to human health and the environment. Consumer, public health and firefighter groups alike have supported the bill since it was first filed in 2013.
“The origin story of flame retardants comes from Big Tobacco, which promoted this toxic product to take attention away from cigarette fires in homes. These ‘retardants’ did not, in fact, inhibit fires, but they did spread polluting and unhealthy toxic chemicals,” said MASSPIRG Executive Director Janet Domenitz. “We congratulate this bill’s sponsors, state Rep. Marjorie Decker and state Sen. Cynthia Creem, for championing such an important step toward a healthier Massachusetts.”

CONSUMER PROTECTION

MASSPIRG helps secure passage of Student Loan Borrower Bill of Rights

Student debt is growing faster in Massachusetts than in any other state—but a new law promises to help the Bay State combat this crisis.

On Jan. 6, in the final hours of the 2020 legislative session, state lawmakers passed the Student Loan Borrower Bill of Rights, which will provide new protections against unfair and deceptive loan servicing practices to nearly 1 million student borrowers across the state. Gov. Charlie Baker then signed the protections into law on Jan. 14.

MASSPIRG organized more than 50 state and national leaders and 113 student leaders from 19 Massachusetts colleges to deliver letters to key committee members in the Legislature.

“We commend the leadership and relentless advocacy of state Sen. Eric Lesser of Longmeadow and state Rep. Natalie Higgins of Leominster, the initial sponsors of the bill,” said Deirdre Cummings, legislative director for MASSPIRG. “Now more than ever, it is critical that we defend students from predatory loan servicers.”

TRANSFORM TRANSPORTATION

All new cars sold in Massachusetts set to be zero-emission vehicles by 2035

You can expect to see a sharp rise in the number of clean electric cars on Routes 128, 495, and other Massachusetts highways and roads.

On Dec. 30, Gov. Charlie Baker announced plans to phase out the sale of new gas-powered cars in Massachusetts by 2035. Following California’s lead, the Bay State is the second in the nation to commit to phasing out gas-powered cars—a commitment that will drastically curtail Massachusetts’ carbon pollution, since transportation accounts for more than 40 percent of the state’s emissions.

“Massachusetts’ plan for all new cars to be electric will drive us in the right direction to address health-harming and climate-changing air pollution,” said MASSPIRG Transportation Advocate John Stout.

“But electric vehicles are just a part of the solution—we also need to invest more in public transportation and other better, cleaner options that will allow people to drive less.”
This past winter, as the effort to vaccinate Americans against COVID-19 gained momentum, misinformation and confusion threatened to limit the effort’s reach.

Our national partners at U.S. PIRG co-hosted a Facebook Live panel with Doctors for America on Jan. 19 to discuss how health providers, policymakers and the media can communicate accurate vaccine information to the public. The panel included Drs. Saad B. Omer, Rob Davidson and Christine Grady, as well as infectious disease and global health journalist Helen Branswell.

Topics included communicating vaccine benefits to rural communities; the extensive testing and review that approved vaccines have undergone; and more.

“As vaccination ramped up at the beginning of the year, vaccine hesitancy posed an obstacle to protecting the country against COVID-19,” said U.S. PIRG Public Health Campaigns Director Matt Wellington, who moderated the panel.

"Vaccinating the country is a challenge, but we know that we can accomplish this feat by following the advice of medical experts,” said U.S. PIRG Public Health Campaigns Director Matt Wellington, who moderated the panel.