Finding common ground and making real progress

Dear CoPIRG member,

Sometimes people ask if it’s frustrating to be involved in political advocacy right now.

Sure, we’ve seen the divisions in our country deepen in recent years, and we’ve watched them harden in Washington, D.C., in ways that make positive action on issues that affect Americans’ lives nearly impossible. That’s frustrating.

But from the beginning, the approach of CoPIRG and our partner groups across the country has been to make progress wherever we can, whenever we can—as best we can—even when things are gridlocked in D.C. That’s as true today as it was in 1971, when PIRG began.

Over the last few years, our national network has focused our energy at the state and local levels, winning changes that are documented in these pages.

For example, our Beyond Plastic campaign helped win bans on single-use plastics in cities and communities across the country. In 2019, six more states passed plastic bag bans and CoPIRG advocates rallied statewide support for a ban on foam food containers and plastic grocery bags.

As we work to improve air quality and cut down on climate emissions, our Transform Transportation campaign is winning support for public transit, electric buses, electric cars and other clean, healthy alternatives to wasting billions on new or expanded highways.

To empower consumers and reduce waste, our Right to Repair campaign called on companies to remove barriers that prevent us from repairing their products. Our advocates and coalition partners put model legislation to guarantee our right to repair in front of 20 state legislatures.

Our leaders in Washington should be doing much more on these and other issues. But we don’t have time to brood about their failures. There are too many opportunities elsewhere to make progress for our health, our safety and the quality of our lives.

Thanks to you, our staff and other supporters are seizing every opportunity we can to win positive results for the public.

Danny Katz
State Director, CoPIRG

P.S. Our staff quickly shifted to working remotely as the COVID-19 crisis swept the United States. But rest assured, we have continued our work to advocate for you and for a healthier, safer world.
Transforming our transportation system

For our health, our safety and our children’s future, we need to make our transportation systems cleaner and more efficient. That’s why, in 2019, we launched our Transform Transportation campaign to reduce the need to drive and to electrify buses and cars—because we believe the easiest, cheapest and most pleasant ways to travel should also be the cleanest and healthiest.

Colorado to see more electric vehicles as state joins Zero Emission Vehicle program

You’re likely to see more electric cars on Colorado’s roads in the next few years, and that means less smog-causing and climate-changing pollution.

On Aug. 16, 2019, Colorado’s Air Quality Control Commission voted eight to one in favor of joining the Zero Emission Vehicle (ZEV) program, making Colorado the eleventh state to do so. The program requires automakers to ensure that an increasing percentage of vehicles offered in-state are electric-powered.

The decision will help reduce ozone pollution and harmful exhaust in a state where smog-alert days are all too common and transportation is expected to account for a quarter of carbon emissions by 2020.

“Joining the Zero Emission Vehicle program will cut air pollution ... and quicken our transition to a cleaner, electric-powered transportation system,” said CoPIRG State Director Danny Katz.

Leading up to the vote, CoPIRG advocates delivered 6,200 petitions in support of joining the program.

We backed a bill that could keep school buses from harming kids’ health.

On the way to and from school every day, more than 25 million children breathe air polluted by the yellow buses that take them there.

Diesel pollution stunts the growth of kids’ lungs and worsens asthma symptoms, and has also been linked to poorer academic performance. That’s why, on June 6, 2019, seven U.S. senators introduced the Clean School Bus Act, which would commit $1 billion over five years to help school districts transition to all-electric buses.

“Our kids shouldn’t have to breathe dirty, dangerous air just to get to school,” said our network’s Transform Transportation campaign director, Matt Casale. “We applaud and endorse this proposal because it will help protect the health of America’s children.”
Moving beyond plastic

With your support this past year, CoPIRG and our national network have made progress to move Colorado and our country beyond single-use plastic by getting rid of the most harmful waste and stopping the use of things we truly don’t need.

41,000 Coloradans call for action to tackle plastic pollution

After the Colorado Senate failed to ban foam take-out containers in May 2019, CoPIRG doubled down on its campaign to move Colorado beyond plastic.

On Nov. 14, CoPIRG State Director Danny Katz and CoPIRG volunteers and partners delivered the signatures of more than 41,000 Colorado residents calling for a ban on foam food containers and plastic grocery bags. Single-use items such as these are among the most pervasive items over-taxing our landfills, littering our communities and polluting waterways such as the Colorado River.

Danny was joined by state Sen. Tammy Story, who sponsored the CoPIRG-backed bill to ban foam takeout containers, and by Councilwoman Kendra Black, who announced Denver’s plastic bag fee.

“Nothing that we use once should be allowed to pollute our state for hundreds of years,” said Danny. “It’s time for Colorado to get rid of these harmful plastics.”

CoPIRG is continuing to call on lawmakers to ban the single-use plastics we just don’t need.

Not one, not two, but six more states banned single-use plastic bags

The number of statewide plastic bag bans in the U.S. multiplied six-fold in 2019, with Maine, New York, Vermont, Connecticut, Delaware and Oregon adding themselves to the list.

The states joined California in requiring retailers and grocers to replace single-use plastic bags with reusable or paper ones. Americans currently throw away 100 billion plastic bags every year, or 300 bags per person. We use these bags for just a few minutes, but they persist in the environment and impact public health for centuries to come.

“These states are leading the country in addressing plastic pollution,” said our national network’s Beyond Plastic campaign director, Alex Truelove. “Clearly, momentum is building on this issue. But these states cannot tackle our plastic pollution crisis alone.”

Together with our national network, CoPIRG is running campaigns to ban single-use plastic bags and other harmful plastics in Colorado and across the country.
Working to ban Roundup

Since the World Health Organization labeled glyphosate, the main ingredient in Roundup, a probable human carcinogen, we’ve been warning the public and working to ban Roundup unless and until it can be proven safe.

In 2019, two more juries ruled that there was enough evidence to hold Roundup culpable for causing the cancers of three plaintiffs, making that three guilty verdicts since August 2018. More than 42,700 farmers, landscapers, home gardeners and others filed lawsuits claiming Roundup’s makers knew of its cancer risk but failed to warn consumers. And the list of U.S. cities that have banned or restricted glyphosate-based herbicides continues to grow. But Roundup is still putting our health at risk, and more needs to be done.

Public education, member action strengthen call to ban Roundup

The more we educate the public about Monsanto’s weed killer Roundup and other glyphosate-based products, the more support we find for banning them—the residue of which can be found practically everywhere.

In July 2019, CoPIRG and our national network kicked off a summer public education drive in 15 states.

“We’re doing all we can to get the facts to legislators about why we should ban Roundup until and unless it’s proven safe,” said Kara Cook-Schultz, director of our national network’s Ban Roundup campaign. “The support and action of our members are making it easier to get local decision-makers to listen.”

Over the course of the summer, our canvassers enlisted more than 47,000 citizens nationwide to join our call for state leaders to ban Roundup and other glyphosate-based products.

Studies find weed killer in beer and wine

The last thing you want to think about when you pour yourself a glass of wine or a cold beer is whether it contains even small amounts of a potentially carcinogenic weed killer.

But the use of glyphosate, the main ingredient in Monsanto’s Roundup, is now so widespread that the chemical is found virtually everywhere—including, as a Feb. 22, 2019, report from our research partners at U.S. PIRG Education Fund found, in 19 of the 20 beer and wine products tested.

“No matter the efforts of brewers and vintners, [U.S. PIRG Education Fund] found that it is incredibly difficult to avoid ... that consumers will likely drink glyphosate at every happy hour and backyard barbecue around the country,” Kara told USA Today.

CoPIRG and our national network are calling on federal, state and local officials to ban the use of glyphosate. We’ll drink to that.
Standing up for our right to repair the things we own

You buy stuff. It breaks or doesn’t work right. You could throw it away and buy new stuff, but you’d rather repair it. But then you find out you can’t do it yourself—you can’t even bring it to a third party repair shop. You have to bring it back to the original company, which can charge an arm and a leg because there’s no competition—and sometimes they just won’t fix it. So you decide to throw the thing away.

This means more cost to consumers, and also means more waste. Americans dispose of 416,000 cell phones per day, and only 15 to 20 percent of electronic waste is recycled.

We imagine a different kind of system, where instead of throwing things out, we reuse, salvage and rebuild. But that means taking on the big companies who would push us into buying more and throwing more away. We’re working to give everyone access to the parts, tools and service information we need to repair products so we can keep things in use and reduce waste.

A year of milestone progress for our right to repair

It’s not as easy to repair our stuff as it should be, but after two years of running our Right to Repair campaign, we’re seeing some progress.

In 2019, the Right to Repair campaign, led by our national network of state PIRGs, Repair.org and iFixit, worked to get our model bills in front of 20 state legislatures, made our case before the Federal Trade Commission and the House Judiciary Committee, and convinced Apple and Microsoft to take small but positive steps toward making it easier to repair their products.
“Running a campaign opposed by companies worth $2.5 trillion makes any progress hard-won,” said Nathan Proctor, our national network’s Right to Repair campaign director. “But when I think back on what we’ve been able to accomplish, it gives me confidence that we can overcome the naysayers and secure our right to fix our own products.”

**The companies that make the stuff you buy shouldn’t make it hard for you to repair it**

When your laptop malfunctions, would you rather throw it away and buy a new one? Or would you rather fix it?

If you’d rather fix it, you have plenty of good company. In 2018, 1.2 million unique Colorado users visited the popular repair site iFixit, searching for manuals and spare parts for their laptops, cellphones, vehicles and more, found a report authored by CoPIRG Foundation and co-released by CoPIRG on Oct. 1, 2019.

If you’ve tried to repair your stuff, you already know that many manufacturers inhibit individual and professional third-party repairs by refusing to provide spare parts, tools and schematics. These obstacles are not only costing us money, but they’re also wasteful.

“Making it hard to fix electronic devices increases the number of fixable devices that enter our waste stream and the number of new devices that need to be produced,” said Allison Conwell, an advocate with CoPIRG Foundation.

It’s time for manufacturers and lawmakers to respect our right to repair.

**Nathan Proctor advocated for our right to repair at the FTC**

We’ve been telling everybody who will listen that the companies that make electronics and other products should make it easier for us to repair our stuff when it breaks. In July, we got to tell the Federal Trade Commission (FTC).

Nathan was a featured speaker on July 16 at the FTC’s “Nixing the Fix” workshop, which explored restrictions on repair.

“I love Star Trek. They literally have six devices on Star Trek to do what one smartphone does,” said Nathan. “We buy these incredible $1,000 hand-held supercomputers and treat them as disposable, (hopefully) recycling them for commodity value? That’s absurd and shows that something is going wrong here. One of the factors ... is the way in which the repair and maintenance of devices are severely limited by the manufacturers.”

Nathan delivered petitions signed by 7,900 supporters to the FTC calling for action to make it easier to repair our stuff.
PIRG Consumer Watchdog on the case

In 2019, our Consumer Watchdog team continued to be on the case: We alerted the public to major food, drug and product recalls, worked to get dangerous products off of store shelves, and more to keep consumers healthy, safe and secure.

How safe is our food? Not safe enough, says PIRG Consumer Watchdog team, and it’s trending in the wrong direction.
Unsafe food recalls in the U.S. are trending the wrong way. From 2013 to 2017, they were up 10 percent overall, and up a whopping 83 percent for the most hazardous meat and poultry recalls.

These were the chief findings in 2019’s “How Safe Is Our Food?” report, written by U.S. PIRG Education Fund—the research and policy arm of our national network—and co-released by CoPIRG on Jan. 17.

“We need to be looking for these farm-to-fork preventative solutions that are logical,” PIRG Consumer Watchdog Adam Garber told USA Today. “By doing that, we can protect people’s health.”

To address our food safety problem, our national network’s Consumer Watchdog team is calling for public health standards for agricultural water, a ban on salmonella in meat, and better recalls to get dangerous food out of people’s homes.

PIRG Consumer Watchdog found deadly infant sleepers still in use at day cares
Even PIRG Consumer Watchdog Adam has to stay alert for dangerous products: He discovered recalled Fisher-Price Rock ‘n Play inclined sleepers at his infant son’s day care in May 2019.

Adam immediately alerted the day care to the recall and the inclined sleepers have since been removed. But the incident reveals fundamental flaws in our recall system.

“We do a great job, for the most part, of preventing the sale of devices or products that have been recalled,” Adam told ABC Action News. “But we have a long way to go to remove them from people’s homes and child care facilities.”

According to a July 2019 U.S. PIRG Education Fund report that surveyed 376 child care facilities, 1 in 10 indicated they were still using at least one Fisher-Price Rock ‘n Play. Inclined infant sleepers have led to the deaths of more than 73 infants and contradict medical guidance that babies should be placed on flat, hard surfaces with no restraints for sleeping.

U.S. PIRG Education Fund’s work to raise the profile of these dangerous sleepers contributed to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission taking action.
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