Make the ringing stop: Protecting you from robocalls

By Teresa Murray, PIRG’s consumer watchdog

Bob Sopko used to get about 20 illegal robocalls a week. You’re probably familiar with the ones that filled his voicemail box: Your car warranty is about to expire. You owe back taxes to the IRS. You can reduce your credit card interest rate. The types of scam calls go on and on.

A couple of months ago, Sopko’s phone stopped ringing so much. He gets only about five calls a week now. “They have dropped significantly,” said Sopko, a university entrepreneurship program director who lives near Cleveland.

Then there’s Cheryl Carstens of Sioux Falls, South Dakota. She gets up to 25 illegal robocalls every day. Her callers also seem concerned about her expiring car warranty—for a Toyota she’s never owned.

What’s the difference between Sopko and Carstens? Sopko’s phone company has completely adopted new caller ID technology that’s aimed at reducing illegal robocalls. Carstens’ phone company has not.

Our consumer watchdogs are on the case

Across the country, 2021 was supposed to be the year when we could start answering our phones again without worrying whether the call is an effort to rip us off, steal personal information, or sell us something we’d never want. (Heck, you’re not even supposed to be getting these calls anyway if you’re on the Do Not Call Registry.)

Cellphone and landline companies were required under federal law to implement new robocall-fighting technology by June 30. But this past fall, our research partners at U.S. PIRG Education Program, Colorado Public Interest Research Group, and other consumer watchdogs have observed that the technology has not been uniformly implemented. This has left people on the hook for robocalls that are easy to avoid.

Is that really the IRS calling? A robocall meant to trick you into disclosing personal information could put your financial security at risk—and government regulators need to do more to ensure phone companies are protecting their customers from these dangerous scams. Credit: Tero Vesalainen via Shutterstock.
Fund made an alarming discovery: Out of the 49 largest phone companies nationwide (those that can serve 1 million customers or more), only 16 had reported to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) that they had completely implemented anti-robocall technology.

What does this mean? It means the industry isn’t doing nearly enough to fight the crime that for years has caused so much heartache and aggravation among consumers across the country. Illegal robocalls cost Americans $10 billion a year in fraud, according to the Federal Trade Commission (FTC)—plus an additional $3 billion a year in wasted time, according to the FCC.

Of course, not all robocalls are illegal or malicious. We sign up for some helpful robocalls: our prescription is in at the pharmacy. Our kid’s school is closed.

Phone calls are generally illegal if:
- It’s a telemarketing call with a recorded message, unless the caller has written permission from you allowing the company to call you.
- It’s a call aimed at deceiving or defrauding you.
- It’s a call from a legitimate company that you haven’t done business with and it’s calling you even if you’ve registered your number on the federal Do Not Call Registry.

The news isn’t all bad: With the new federal regulations taking effect, scam calls dropped by 29% nationwide from June to August, according to YouMail, a leading robocall filtering company. But there’s still more to be done, especially as we’re seeing new threats such as robo-text messages not covered by the law and more targeted scam calls thanks to data breaches.

**What’s next**

PIRG’s Consumer Watchdog team is continuing to look into what the FCC and phone companies are doing to rein in robocalls. And we’re sharing our findings to spur further action.

For instance, many carriers are not required to comply with the new law to reduce robocalls until June 2023. The FCC admits that robocalls are still on the rise for some smaller providers. But Americans need better protections from robocalls now, not two years from now—so we’re urging the FCC to require all companies to comply as soon as possible.

In the meantime, my team and I have put together 18 tips to help you reduce robocalls and protect you and your loved ones from scams. Find the guide online at: copirg.org/robocalls.

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**Zero Out Toxics**

**Victory: EPA bans pesticide linked to brain damage in children**

After PIRG and supporters like you spoke out, a brain-damaging pesticide will no longer be allowed on our food.

On Aug. 18, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) announced that it will ban the pesticide chlorpyrifos from use on food crops. Linked to brain damage in children, chlorpyrifos was banned for household use two decades ago—and now the EPA has finally moved to stop it from contaminating our food as well. CoPIRG, our national network and our coalition partners delivered more than 27,000 petition signatures calling on the EPA to ban chlorpyrifos.

“The EPA has known about the health risks associated with chlorpyrifos for years. Now, families can rest easier, knowing that their children won’t be exposed to this brain-damaging pesticide in their food,” said Danielle Melgar, Zero Out Toxics advocate for our national network.
“But chlorpyrifos will still be allowed on golf courses and turf, which means we need to do more to convince decision-makers to protect Americans from this toxic chemical.”

#CLEANAIRCOLORADO

Colorado failed again to meet air quality standards. #CleanAirColorado is here to help.

After Colorado once again failed to meet the Environmental Protection Agency’s deadline to reduce ozone pollution in last summer, CoPIRG launched the #CleanAirColorado campaign to tackle our state’s dirty air problem.

At the Aug. 18 launch event for the campaign, CoPIRG called on local, state and federal officials to work collaboratively on expanding clean transit options to combat the harmful emissions from gas and diesel-powered vehicles. Since transportation is one of the region’s largest sources of ozone pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, cleaning up our transit would play a key role in clearing our air.

“The gravity of our air pollution problem requires a significant increase in the clean travel options people have, and soon,” said Danny Katz, CoPIRG executive director.

“We need all levels of government to collaboratively weave together a set of strategies that fuel each other. No one entity or policy will solve this problem. We need unprecedented collaboration and focus to clean up our air.”

BEYOND PLASTIC

CoPIRG earns Sustainable Community Partner award from Good Business Colorado

With help from CoPIRG members, we earned special recognition for our work to reduce plastic pollution.

On Oct. 14, CoPIRG accepted the Sustainable Community Partner award from Good Business Colorado for our work in spearheading the Zero Waste Colorado Coalition and the passage of the Plastic Pollution Reduction Act. The award is given in recognition of efforts to build a more prosperous, equitable and sustainable Colorado.

The Plastic Pollution Reduction Act is one of the most comprehensive plastic reduction laws in the country, and the first such law passed by a non-coastal state to eliminate harmful single-use plastics. The bill phases out single-use plastic bags and polystyrene foam cups and containers and reverses a law that prohibited municipalities from taking action on plastic pollution.

CoPIRG Executive Director Danny Katz accepted the award on behalf of our organization’s members and staff.

“We are proud to accept a community partner award from Good Business Colorado on behalf of the Zero Waste Coalition. Together, we helped pass the Plastic Pollution Reduction Act to phase out some of the worst single-use plastics,” said Danny.
Federal bill would get single-use plastics out of our national parks

Seeing plastic trash while enjoying time in nature is a frustrating reality we’ve learned to live with. A new bill could change that.

On Oct. 10, U.S. Rep. Mike Quigley (Ill.) introduced the Reducing Waste in National Parks Act, which would ban the sale and distribution of single-use plastics such as bottles, utensils, straws and packaging in national parks. The bill would drastically reduce the 70 million pounds of waste the National Park Service handles each year; a 2013 review of Yellowstone National Park found that plastic water bottles represented half of the park’s entire solid waste load.

“We cannot safeguard our most protected lands from waste pollution until we get rid of the threat posed by single-use plastics,” said PIRG Zero Waste Campaign Associate Juliana Clejan. “It’s time to take action and end the sale of the most harmful and unnecessary products infiltrating our national parks.”

Danny Katz: Danny directs the operations of CoPIRG and is a leading voice in Denver and across the state on issues such as improving transportation, defending consumers, and getting big money out of our elections. He also serves on the Colorado Department of Transportation’s Efficiency and Accountability Committee, as well as the Transit and Rail Advisory Committee, and is a founding member of the Financial Equity Coalition.

In addition to advocating for the Reducing Waste in National Parks Act, Alex Truelove and our Zero Waste team have continued to organize citizen advocates like you around reducing pollution from plastic packaging.