CoPIRG 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, CoPIRG 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:

CoPIRG 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, CoPIRG 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 Colorado, 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 Colorado—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.

CoPIRG takes on plastic and clothing waste

We have a chance to dramatically reduce waste in Colorado.

In February, a comprehensive plastic pollution reduction bill was introduced in the Colorado Legislature, sponsored by state Reps. Alex Valdez and Lisa Cutter and state Sen. Julie Gonzales. Among other necessary policies, the legislation will set clear deadlines for restaurants and retailers to phase-out single-use plastics such as polystyrene take-out containers and plastic bags.

We’re mobilizing to make sure this vital bill becomes law. For instance, in March, we helped organize more than 400 students from across the state to lobby their legislators via Zoom.

In addition, we launched Waste is Out of Fashion this past January, a new campaign to reduce clothing waste, which is currently America’s fastest-growing waste stream. We’re advocating to ban an industry practice in which clothing companies wastefully destroy or landfill unsold clothing to make way for new merchandise.

NEWS BRIEFS

A look at our 2021 legislative priorities

Every day, officials in Washington, D.C., make decisions that impact our health, our safety and our future. Our network’s advocates have been crafting legislation, sharing research and bringing the voice of the public into these decisions.

Our ongoing response to the COVID-19 pandemic topped our list of 2021 federal priorities. Our network continued its calls for Congress and the Biden administration to provide sufficient testing, vaccines and personal protective equipment to save lives and end the pandemic.

Other top priorities include: increasing funding for clean transportation and transit across our state; watchdogging the implementation of a new law that will prohibit surprise medical billing; working to win federal policies to stop price gouging for essential medical supplies; and more.

“In 2021, whether from our separate bubbles
or back in our more traditional offices, we will continue to focus on bringing Americans together around policies that will improve our quality of life by making all of us healthier and more secure,” said Faye Park, president of our national partner U.S. PIRG.

COVID-19 RESPONSE

Nursing homes struggle through widespread staffing shortages amid the pandemic

Saving as many lives as possible during the coronavirus pandemic means prioritizing the health and safety of the nation’s most vulnerable populations.

But nursing homes around the country suffered from staffing shortages in 2020 as fatigue, COVID infections, PPE shortages and lack of child care impacted workers, according to January analysis from our national research partners at U.S. PIRG Education Fund.

As the number of understaffed nursing homes increased from May to December 2020, more than 200,000 Americans resided in homes that reported shortages of nurses, aides or clinical staff at any given point through most of last year. By early December, the percentage of nursing homes reporting a shortage had reached 23 percent.

“This is a circular nightmare,” said Teresa Murray, U.S. PIRG Education Fund Consumer Watchdog. “Staff shortages existed before the pandemic and they just got worse as COVID-19 spread.”

U.S. PIRG Education Fund advised rapid approval of emergency funding for nursing homes and the prioritization of long-term care staff and residents for vaccination.

TRANSFORM TRANSPORTATION

Colorado commission approves $110 million Xcel investment in electric vehicles

Colorado’s largest utility is bringing more electric vehicles to the Centennial State.

On Dec. 23, the Colorado Public Utilities Commission voted to approve Xcel Energy’s Transportation Electrification Plan, which includes investments of $110 million over three years to build out electric vehicle (EV) charging infrastructure, provides various incentives to switch to EVs, and will convert fleets of school buses to electric power.

Since the original plan was proposed in May 2020, CoPIRG Foundation has advocated for its approval and worked to ensure its strategies are the right ones to transition more people from gas-powered cars to cleaner EVs.

“This is a great example of how individual consumer actions, combined with market forces and forward-looking public policies, can lead to a transportation system with lower costs, cleaner air, better health and fewer emissions,” wrote CoPIRG Foundation Executive Director Danny Katz in an op-ed published in The Colorado Sun. “The time is now to accelerate Colorado toward a zero-emissions future.”

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BE AN ADVOCATE FOR COLORADO’S FUTURE
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.

“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.