Wildlife Over Waste

Last year, PennEnvironment launched a campaign to help tackle the growing threat of single-use plastics by calling for a statewide ban on one of the worst forms of plastic: polystyrene foam takeout cups and containers (what many of us call Styrofoam). We are continuing that effort in 2019 and expanding our work into other pervasive environmental threats from our throw-away society.

A growing plastic waste problem

Few people realize that this plastic foam doesn’t degrade, but breaks into smaller and smaller pieces. These plastic pieces drift into our environment, and often end up in our waterways. Too often, animals mistake this plastic pollution for food. And just like the foam doesn’t degrade in nature, animals are also unable to digest it; instead, it can fill their stomachs and lead to starvation.

Nothing we use for a few minutes should pollute our environment and harm our wildlife for centuries—which is why this spring, we’ve stepped up our work to tackle plastic pollution in Pennsylvania.

Zero Waste PA

Starting earlier this year, PennEnvironment began coordinating with a group of state representatives to develop and introduce the “Zero Waste PA” package of legislation. This package of bills is meant to tackle many of the most common ways that single-use plastics and our so-called “throwaway” society threaten our health, environment and quality of life.

We kicked off our efforts by holding a news conference for at the capitol. Alongside the package’s dozen legislative sponsors, we announced the introduction of our Zero Waste PA legislation.

The need for this legislation has never been more clear: Americans dispose of 300 million plastic grocery bags, 70 million polystyrene cups and a half-billion plastic straws—every day. This waste litters our communities, polluting our environment, and ending up in our rivers, lakes, streams and inevitably down-stream in our oceans.

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Leading the charge to a 100% renewable energy future for Pennsylvania

Pennsylvania is the fourth-largest emitter of greenhouse gases in the country, but that could all change if PennEnvironment-drafted legislation passes into law.

PennEnvironment is working with a bipartisan group of legislators to reintroduce bills in both the state House and Senate this year that would require Pennsylvania to transition to 100 percent clean, renewable energy by 2050. This legislation couldn’t come soon enough, with recent reports showing that climate change’s effects are not in the distant future as previously thought.

In an interview with CBS News, PennEnvironment Executive Director David Masur noted, “We’re not California. We’re not Hawaii. When you have a purple state that Trump won, where the General Assembly is dominated by conservative Republicans, it’s significant and shows that other states with a history of fossil fuel production can lead the way.”

A commitment to renewable energy at this level would make Pennsylvania a national leader in clean energy.

PennEnvironment sues three Pittsburgh facilities for Clean Air Act violations

In the wake of ongoing illegal air pollution emissions in the Pittsburgh area,

PennEnvironment, National Environmental Law Center and Clean Air Council announced our federal Clean Air Act lawsuit against three U.S. Steel plants: the Clairton Coke Works plant, the nearby Irvin Works steel mill in West Mifflin, and Edgar Thomson Steel Works mill in Braddock. Since a fire at the Clairton facility disabled pollution controls in December 2018, local air monitors have recorded repeated spikes in pollution levels in the surrounding community. At times, the pollution threat was so severe that the Allegheny County Health Department warned residents of 22 nearby cities and townships to limit outdoor activity.

“When powerful, deep-pocketed polluters attempt to run roughshod on our environmental laws and put our health at risk, PennEnvironment will be there to defend local residents in David versus Goliath fights like this,” said Ashleigh Deemer, PennEnvironment’s Western Pennsylvania director.

National conservation program renewed

After allowing one of the nation’s cornerstone conservation programs to expire in the fall of 2018, Congress came together in rare bipartisan fashion and renewed the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) program this past spring.

Since the program’s inception more than 50 years ago, LWCF has funded thousands of critical conservation programs across the U.S. This includes more than 1,500 projects in Pennsylvania, totaling more than $315 million. LWCF has funded iconic outdoor places such as Gettysburg, Valley Forge and the Flight 93 Memorial.

PennEnvironment worked hard to convince the state’s congressional delegation to press for the speedy renewal of LWCF and vote in its favor, lining up thousands of petition signatures and phone calls to legislators, and garnering dozens of media stories about the program’s successes. When the dust settled, every member of Pennsylvania’s congressional delegation except Rep. Scott Perry and Sen. Pat Toomey voted to renew LWCF.
Specific legislation in this package of bills includes:

- A statewide ban on polystyrene.
- A ban on plastic straws.
- A statewide fee on plastic bags.
- Measures to promote composting statewide.
- A proposal to increase funding for recycling programs at the state and local level.
- Enhancement of the state’s electronic waste programs.

For the full list of legislation and the sponsors, visit our website.

“Plastic waste in our communities is quickly becoming an epidemic,” noted Rep. Tim Briggs, the lead sponsor of the legislation to ban polystyrene foam takeout cups and containers. “Eliminating polystyrene products that cannot decompose or be recycled is a step toward a more sustainable environment.”

Going forward, it is our priority to continue to build support for the Zero Waste PA legislation by recruiting more legislators to add their names to this package of bills as cosponsors, and by introducing similar legislation in the state Senate.

By David Masur
Executive Director, PennEnvironment

Moving beyond plastic

PennEnvironment is following up our kick-off news conference by bringing this issue directly to communities across the state through our door-to-door citizen outreach efforts. Over the summer months, PennEnvironment staff and volunteers will talk with tens of thousands of Pennsylvanians about our effort to tackle single-use plastics and the chronic problems of waste in our throwaway society. At the same time, we will collect thousands of petition signatures calling on state officials to implement the Zero Waste PA legislative package as quickly as possible.

“PennEnvironment is so excited to work with this incredible group of legislative leaders to tackle some of the most pervasive issues related to single-use plastics, and waste issues in general,” stated PennEnvironment’s Executive Director David Masur. “We have to take concrete steps to address the many downsides to a throwaway society.”

I’m glad to have you with us as we continue to find ways to harness our country’s wealth, technology and imagination to make our state and our planet greener and healthier for all of us. In these pages you’ll find some highlights of our work together so far in 2019.

Thank you for making all this work possible with your action and support.

David Masur
Executive Director

Below: PennEnvironment volunteers and staff with Rep. Tim Briggs at our river cleanup event last summer.
Protecting kids from lead in drinking water

From the start of the 2019-2020 legislative session in Harrisburg, PennEnvironment has worked with our elected officials to reintroduce some of our top policy priorities that didn’t make it over the finish line from the previous session.

This includes our efforts to pass bipartisan legislation to tackle the threat of lead in drinking water at Pennsylvania schools.

Since the Flint, Michigan, drinking water disaster, PennEnvironment has pushed for policies to ensure that all Pennsylvania children have safe, clean drinking water in the place where they spend most of their waking hours: in our schools. We’re partnering again with state Rep. Karen Boback in this effort as she reintroduces legislation to set stringent standards to address lead in drinking water in Pennsylvania’s school buildings. PennEnvironment is pressing state legislators to become original co-sponsors of this proposal. We’re also working to garner statewide media coverage of our national partner Environment America Research & Policy Center’s new “Get the Lead Out” study, which gave Pennsylvania a grade of “F” in dealing with the threat of lead in school drinking water.

Pennsylvania received an “F” for lack of action in dealing with the threat of lead in school drinking water.