



A view of Lake Michigan from Illinois Beach State Park.

Banning Single-Use Plastics

Protecting Our Health and the Great Lakes

We use plastic bags, straws and utensils, and foam cups and containers for just a few minutes before tossing them, and then they can pollute our environment for hundreds of years. We can protect our health and the Great Lakes by banning or limiting these products, as hundreds of communities and nine states have already done.

The plastic waste crisis

- U.S. homes and businesses throw out enough plastic to fill a football stadium 1.5 times every day on average, and that amount is increasing.¹
- Only 8% of this plastic is recycled – 92% is landfilled, incinerated or littered.
- Plastic products break down over hundreds of years into microplastic particles that persist and accumulate in the environment.

Plastic pollutes the Great Lakes

- A Rochester Institute of Technology study estimates that nearly 22 million pounds of plastic pollution enter the Great Lakes every year – enough to fill more than 16,300 garbage trucks.
- More than 85% of the trash picked up in Great Lakes beach cleanups is made of plastic. Among the most common items are plastic pieces, foam pieces, straws and drink stirrers.
- One study found plastics in all 107 water samples collected from 29 Great Lakes tributaries in six states.

Plastic threatens our health

- Microplastics have been found in the food we eat, the water we drink, and the air we breathe. A recent study estimates that humans could be ingesting up to a credit card's worth of microplastics every week.
- Some plastic additives and chemicals have been found to interfere with brain development and disrupt the hormone system, and some chemicals that cling to plastics can cause cancer and birth defects.

Solution: Ban single-use plastics

- We can't recycle our way out of this problem – most plastic can only be recycled a few times before it becomes too degraded.
- Nearly half (47%) of U.S. plastic waste is from single-use products and packaging. So banning and limiting plastic products like bags, foam cups and containers, straws, and utensils could significantly reduce plastic pollution.
- We don't need single-use plastics. There are plenty of readily recyclable, compostable and, better yet, reusable alternatives available.

¹ View all citations online at <https://bit.ly/2GuzqdZ>.

Single-Use Plastic Bag Bans

Why ban bags?

- The U.S. uses more than 280 million plastic bags every day on average. We use these plastic bags for a few minutes and then they pollute our communities and environment for decades.
- We don't need plastic bags – we can simply use reusable bags for most things instead.
- Plastic bags are not readily recyclable and can jam up recycling equipment, hurting the overall recycling system.
- Plastic bag bans work. After Chicago began taxing single-use bags, disposable bag use dropped by an estimated 40%.

Current bag bans and restrictions

Hundreds of jurisdictions across the country – including Chicago and Washtenaw County, Michigan – have instituted fees or banned single-use plastic bags, joining Washington, D.C., and the following eight states:

- California
- Hawaii
- New York
- Connecticut
- Delaware
- Maine
- Oregon
- Vermont



A plastic bag caught in an Osprey nest.

Single-use plastic bag ban best practices

- Pair plastic bag bans with paper bag fees of at least 10 cents to encourage consumers to use reusable bags.
- Do not allow thicker disposable film plastic bags to be classified as “reusable” – replacing thin plastic shopping bags with thicker versions can actually increase waste.
- Require paper bags to be made from at least 40% and up to 100% recycled content.
- Use collected paper bag fees to fund additional waste reduction efforts or reusable bag giveaway programs.
- Apply bag bans to all retailers that distribute single-use bags at the checkout – grocery stores, clothing stores, restaurants, etc.
- Enforce the requirements and establish fines for non-compliance.

Single-Use Foam Cup and Container Bans

Why ban foam cups and containers?

- Pieces of polystyrene foam – what most of us call Styrofoam – are one of the most common types of litter picked up during Great Lakes beach cleanups.
- U.S. homes and businesses throw out more than 5 million pounds of polystyrene cups, plates and other containers (both foam and not) every day on average.
- It is often impossible to recycle polystyrene or is more expensive than using new polystyrene, so only 0.4% was recycled in 2017. Worse yet, polystyrene can be missed by recycling sorters and contaminate what would otherwise be valuable recycling streams, such as paper.
- We don't need single-use polystyrene cups and containers – there are plenty of recyclable, compostable, and, better yet, reusable alternatives available.
- Polystyrene bans reduce waste. From 2008 to 2012, after the California cities of Santa Cruz and Pacific Grove banned polystyrene foam food containers, polystyrene litter on local beaches decreased by as much as 71%.

Current foam bans and restrictions

261 towns, cities and counties – including Minneapolis and St. Louis Park, Minnesota – have limited or banned single-use polystyrene cups and containers and the following three states have banned them:

- Maine
- Maryland
- Vermont



Floating garbage including a foam container and fragments.

Foam ban best practices and next steps

To ensure that foam cup and container bans effectively reduce waste, governments should enforce the requirement and establish fines for non-compliance. To increase the impact of foam bans, governments can also:

- Require that replacement single-use containers and lids be practically and economically recyclable or compostable at existing local facilities.
- Incentivize food establishments to replace foam containers with containers made from recycled content.
- Encourage dine-in establishments to provide reusable food containers – plates, bowls, cups, etc.
- Update laws to allow food establishments to use customers' reusable containers.
- Encourage food establishments to provide customers with reusable carry-out containers. Some businesses already do so and charge a deposit, which encourages customers to return the containers later.

Limiting Plastic Straws, Utensils and Other Plastic Foodware

Why limit straws and utensils?

- The U.S. uses hundreds of millions of straws and over 100 million plastic utensils every day. Straws and drink stirrers were among the most common types of litter picked up during Great Lakes beach clean-ups in 2019.
- We don't need these products. There are biodegradable and, better yet, reusable alternatives to single-use plastic straws, drink stirrers and utensils.
- Straws, stirrers and plastic utensils aren't effectively recyclable because they are small enough to fall through recycling sorting equipment – they can also jam up equipment, hurting overall recycling.

Current bans and restrictions

At least 30 municipalities and the three states below have limited single-use plastic straws. Many municipalities have also limited drink stirrers and the use of plastic utensils.

- Vermont
- Oregon
- California



Litter along the shore of Lake Ontario.

Best practices and next steps

- In conjunction with a ban, require that food and drink retailers keep a small number of single-use, bendable plastic straws on-site for disabled customers and exempt this subset of straws from the requirements.
- Require that food establishments only provide replacement single-use straws, utensils, drink stirrers, sauce packets, and other miscellaneous single-use products upon request and only for takeout service.
- To make sure the requirement is effective, enforce it and establish fines for non-compliance. To make the requirement even more impactful, decision-makers can also:
 - Require replacement single-use straws, utensils, etc. to be practically and economically recyclable or compostable at existing local facilities.
 - Encourage replacement single-use straws, utensils, etc. provided for takeout to be made from recycled content.
 - For dine-in service, encourage establishments to only provide reusable straws, utensils, etc.

