



PIRG Zero Waste Advocate Holly Thompson speaks at an event in Washington, D.C., calling on Whole Foods to get rid of unnecessary single-use plastic packaging. Credit: Yazan Aboushi

BEYOND PLASTIC

10 steps Whole Foods can take to cut out single-use plastic

Authored by Matt Casale, who directs PIRG's zero waste campaigns.

Whole Foods has built its brand on a commitment to sustainability and environmentally responsible retail. Its customers shop at its stores because they share that commitment, and they expect the products on the shelves to reflect those values.

One value those customers increasingly share is a desire to reduce the amount of plastic in their lives. But the reality is that Whole Foods often makes it harder, rather than easier, for them to do that.

A survey by our research partners at U.S. PIRG Education Fund reviewed the packaging options of Whole Foods' "365" in-house brand products in 27 stores across the country to assess consumers' options for avoiding plastic. We found that customers have limited opportuni-

ties to purchase 365 brand items without plastic packaging. Fewer than 50% of the products surveyed were available in plastic-free packaging in the majority of Whole Foods stores.

These results indicate not only that Whole Foods is missing out on a major opportunity to reduce the amount of plastic waste piling up in our communities and environment right now, but also that it could be leading the whole industry further away from single-use plastic if it were to take action. Here are the 10 most effective steps Whole Foods can take:

1) Eliminate plastic produce packaging

Trader Joe's recently eliminated plastic packaging around apples, potatoes and tomatoes and switched deli plastic wrapping for paper. Whole Foods can, and should, do the same.



CoPIRG and The Public Interest Network are celebrating 50 years of action for a change.

SUMMER 2023

WHOLE FOODS HAS A PLASTIC PROBLEM CONT.



In large part because of its excessive use of single-use plastic packaging, Whole Foods scored an "F" two years in a row on a survey of different companies' efforts to reduce plastic waste.

OUR MISSION

When consumers are cheated or the voices of ordinary citizens are drowned out by special interest lobbyists, PIRG speaks up and takes action. We uncover threats to public health and well-being and fight to end them, using the time-tested tools of investigative research, media exposes, grassroots organizing, advocacy and litigation. PIRG's mission is to deliver persistent, results oriented public interest activism that protects consumers, encourages a fair, sustainable economy and fosters responsive democratic government.

2) Introduce reusable packaging in all Whole Foods stores

One key piece of the plastic-reduction puzzle is reusable packaging. Grocery stores such as Kroger now partner with Loop to provide reusable packaging for a variety of products. The system works by charging a 100%-refundable deposit for reusable packaging, allowing consumers to shop, eat and return the containers to the store.

3) Ensure all remaining packaging is recyclable or compostable—and labeled truthfully

In addition to committing to 100% reusable, recyclable or compostable packaging for Whole Foods-branded products, the company should eliminate the "chasing arrows" symbols from products that cannot be recycled.

4) Disclose plastic packaging use

Currently, Whole Foods advertises reducing its plastic packaging by 1 million pounds annually. But without disclosing the total amount or types of plastic packaging used each year, there is no way to tell how impactful this reduction truly is.

5) Phase out single-use packaging with dangerous chemicals (BPA, phthalates and PFAS)

To live up to its green reputation, Whole Foods should get rid of all packaging containing these dangerous chemical compounds, as other companies have already started doing.

6) Accept reusable containers and cups for fresh food and coffee bars

It's a commonsense solution: allowing customers to bring their own reusable containers at the deli counter, to-go counter, fish and seafood counter, bakery, hot-food bar, and coffee and

smoothie bars. Other stores, including Metro in Canada, have already taken this step.

7) Offer on-site compost

Most Whole Foods stores offer fresh food bars with compostable foodware, but many do not have on-site compost for the food waste they produce and that consumers create when they use their on-site dining facilities. Changing that would help reduce the millions of tons of compostable food and packaging America wastes every year.

8) Offer 100% recycled paper produce and bulk bags

Whole Foods was the first national retailer to offer Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certified paper bags at checkout counters. For each bag, consumers are charged a 5-cent fee, incentivizing reusable bags instead of paper. This same principle should be applied to bagging produce and bulk items.

9) Promote reusable packaging alternatives throughout the store

When perusing the aisles of most Whole Foods stores, you'll come across plastic bags in the produce section and paper bags at checkout stations. Whole Foods should always sell reusable bags at these locations.

10) Invest in community-based waste reduction and recycling infrastructure

Whole Foods has several philanthropic programs, including Sourced for Good, the Whole Planet Foundation and the Whole Kids Foundation, among others. These programs provide vital support and funding, but could be expanded to invest in waste reduction and recycling infrastructure initiatives.

NEWS BRIEFS

RIGHT TO REPAIR

How to know which consumer electronics are repairable

Tired of the ways consumer tech companies incentivize buying a new phone, laptop, tablet or other device every year or two, rather than being able to keep what you already own in use for longer?

The second edition of U.S. PIRG Education

NEWS BRIEFS

Fund's "Failing the Fix" scorecard grades popular manufacturers on how easy (or hard) they make it for their customers to fix their electronics when something breaks. Some of the key results: Motorola continues to lead with a B+, followed by Samsung with a C, Google with a D+, and Apple with a D, up from last year's F.

"In spite of the rapidly growing problem of electronic waste, a number of these companies are unfairly restricting access to the tools and information needed to repair their devices, or actively lobbying against Right to Repair legislation (or both)," said PIRG Right to Repair Campaign Senior Director Nathan Proctor. "Consumers—and the planet—deserve better."

DON'T SELL MY DATA

Electronic toys can collect kids' data. Here's what you need to know.

You're probably aware that, in our increasingly digital world, various bits of information about ourselves (our "data") are widely available on the internet and collected by online companies. But did you know that children are often put in the same position by digital and internet-connected toys?

R.J. Cross, director of PIRG's Don't Sell My Data campaign, is helping parents get up to speed on some of the potential dangers of these "smart" toys, such as the risk that a child's information could become exposed online. R.J. and our consumer team have focused on providing concrete tips on whether and how to buy a smart toy, and for ensuring safe play if you do decide to bring one home.

"Having any data collected on a child that isn't strictly necessary is unsafe—especially when one of the primary ways this data can be used is to be sold to advertisers," R.J. told CBS Mornings, which covered U.S. PIRG Education Fund's "Smart Decisions about Smart Toys" report.

BAN TOXIC PFAS

REI commits to eliminating PFAS from its products

Making it a leader in the outdoor retail industry, REI has required its suppliers to eliminate all per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, or



Fox 13 News Seattle

PFAS, from the pots, pans, shoes, bags, packs and similar gear sold by the retail chain.

PFAS have earned the nickname "forever chemicals" because they stick around, quite literally, forever. They're man-made and made to last—meaning that when they inevitably seep out into the environment, they stay there, accumulating both in volume and in the level of danger they pose to our health. PFAS exposure has been linked to serious health effects including liver damage, developmental issues, immune suppression and cancer.

"Outdoor clothing and gear brands are associated with active outdoor living and some have branded themselves as eco-conscious, yet many have taken little or no action on getting PFAS out of their products," said Matt Casale, director of PIRG's environment campaigns. "REI's new commitment places it among the industry leaders, and those companies that have not yet acted should follow suit."

PIRG's R.J. Cross gets the word out on Fox13 News Seattle about the ways internet-connected toys can put kids' personal information at risk.

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1543 Wazee St., Ste. 330
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CITIZEN AGENDA • SUMMER 2023

50
YEARS

CoPIRG and our national network are celebrating 50 years of action for a change. The Public Interest Network operates and supports organizations committed to a shared vision of a better world and a strategic approach to social change.

CLEAN AIR COLORADO

Electric cars and equipment would mean cleaner air

A newly proposed policy could make it easier for more Coloradans to transition to clean transportation and lawn and garden equipment.

Gov. Jared Polis has come out with a proposal for \$120 million in new tax credits to help the state achieve its climate and clean air goals by expanding incentives for purchasing electric vehicles, e-bikes, and electric lawnmowers and leaf blowers.

The latter category is notable, as a CoPIRG report showed that gas-powered lawn and garden equipment contribute an outsized amount to our state's harmful ozone pollution problem. "Fully transitioning away from gas-powered equipment could achieve nearly one-fifth of the reduction needed to meet the Front Range region's



CoPIRG Public Health Advocate Alexandra Simon (second from left) joins U.S. Sen. John Hickenlooper and other clean energy allies to celebrate Colorado's progress toward an electric vehicle future over the past decade.

ozone pollution goals," said CoPIRG Executive Director Danny Katz.

CoPIRG applauds the governor for including these incentives in the budget proposal and looks forward to working with the Legislature on the details.

FEATURED STAFF



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.

Kimball Nelson

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