



One in 6 Americans lives near a toxic Superfund site, and there are 38 sites awaiting cleanup here in North Carolina. Credit: Public domain

ZERO OUT TOXICS

Cleaning up toxic waste—on the polluter's dime

After 26 years of citizens footing the bill for polluters' messes, Congress has passed a "polluter pays" tax on the production of hazardous chemicals.

The new law—which PIRG helped champion in the bipartisan federal infrastructure package—will hold polluters responsible for the cost of cleaning up the nation's most dangerous toxic waste sites. And an additional polluter tax on oil is also being considered as part of the Build Back Better Act.

So what will these policies actually do, and why is it so important that they were included in our country's historic infrastructure investment packages?

'Polluter Pays' helps keep our communities safe from dangerous chemicals. Toxic waste

sites that the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has tagged for cleanup under its Superfund program can contain arsenic, lead, dioxin, mercury, benzene, asbestos and other hazardous chemicals. These chemicals have been linked to cancer, reproductive problems, birth defects and other serious illnesses.

One recent study found that living near one of these sites—1 in 6 Americans does—was correlated with a shorter lifespan. There are 38 priority sites in North Carolina alone, and more than 1,300 nationwide. Just one life put at risk by these festering sites is too many—securing the funding necessary to clean up toxic waste couldn't be more urgent.

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

ZERO OUT TOXICS: CONT.

Putting the financial burden of cleanup back where it belongs: On the polluters themselves



PIRG Make Polluters Pay Campaign Associate Jillian Gordner (top left) speaks with experts, advocates and lawmakers about how, without a “polluter pays” policy to fund the Superfund, taxpayers are left with a toxic financial burden.

Since the original “polluter pays” taxes lapsed in 1995, the government lost billions in revenue from the polluting industries that create the contaminants at these toxic waste sites—and it had to rely increasingly on funding from taxpayers like you and me to cover the cost of cleanup.

However, that money couldn’t make up the shortfall. Cleanup of Superfund toxic waste sites slowed to a crawl, leaving Americans at risk of serious illness for longer. Of the more than 1,300 Superfund sites on the National Priorities List today, 78% have been on the list for more than 20 years.

People like you and me weren’t the ones dumping toxic waste and putting nearby communities at risk—so why should we be the ones footing the bill for the cleanup? The new polluter tax will help us finally flip the script and make polluters responsible for cleaning up their mess.

And not only that, but this tax will pave the way for even stronger policies in the future. This is our best opportunity in decades to finally clean up America’s most dangerous toxic waste sites—but it’s just the first of many steps toward fully protecting our communities.

The work continues

We’re still calling on the EPA to start treating the Superfund program like the priority that it is, including accounting for the impact of climate change when designing the cleanup plan for a

site. Hurricanes, floods and sea-level rise—all made more severe by global warming—threaten to sweep toxic chemicals from Superfund sites into nearby communities, lakes, rivers and groundwater.

With at least 800 Superfund sites at extreme risk of flooding, it’s not a question of if, but when these sites will spill highly toxic chemicals into nearby communities—unless the EPA uses the program’s new funding wisely and cleans up the most vulnerable areas first.

We’ll win more progress on this crucial issue the same way we won the “polluter pays” tax in the bipartisan infrastructure bill. We’ll keep the public informed with reports, educational webinars and media outreach. We’ll gather thousands more petition signatures to show the EPA and other decision-making bodies that Americans want them to take action. And we’ll work with our partners to get the policies we want across the finish line.

By Jillian Gordner, PIRG Make Polluters Pay campaign associate

NEWS BRIEFS

PUBLIC HEALTH

New report showcases devastating toll of antibiotic-resistant infections.

In 2018, McDonald’s promised to set targets for reducing the use of medically important antibiotics throughout its global beef supply chain. In 2019, more than 1.2 million people died worldwide from drug-resistant infections. It’s never been more urgent that McDonald’s steps up and keeps its promise.

On Feb. 8, NCPIRG Education Fund, our national network and a broad coalition of advocacy groups sent McDonald’s CEO Chris Kempczinski more than 25,000 petition signatures urging the company to do its part to fight antibiotic resistance. Two weeks prior, an updated report on the global death toll of drug-resistant bacteria—a widespread consequence of antibiotic overuse, including on factory farms—found that the number of people killed by these infections in 2019 was higher than the previous annual estimate by over half a million.

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.

NEWS BRIEFS

“As one of the world’s biggest beef purchasers, McDonald’s has the power to pressure meat producers to transform how they use antibiotics and raise animals,” said Matt Wellington, PIRG public health campaigns director. “Now, McDonald’s has to follow through and do it.”

RIGHT TO REPAIR

‘Repair is not a crime’: PIRG-backed repair bills make headway in Congress

An electronics manufacturer could sue you if you tried to fix one of its products yourself, thanks to an antiquated copyright law.

We finally have a chance to leave that law in the past. The bipartisan Freedom to Repair Act, introduced in Congress on Feb. 2, would repeal the federal copyright policies that have allowed the most powerful corporations in the world to control who repairs the things we own.

Also introduced in early February, the Agriculture Right to Repair Act would be a major Right to Repair victory for farmers, who could save time and money if they had full access to fix their equipment or could hire an independent mechanic to do it for them.

“Archaic rules intended to stop Napster users from sharing Britney Spears songs have no place a generation later preventing farmers from fixing tractors, or local repair shops from fixing our phones,” said PIRG Senior Right to Repair Campaign Director Nathan Proctor. “It’s no surprise that fixing this oversight has bipartisan support. It’s common sense.”

CONSUMER PROTECTION

We’re telling Best Buy: Consumers deserve to know about the health risks of gas stoves

If you were about to buy an appliance that could emit harmful air pollutants into your home, you’d want to know, right?

That’s the focus of NCPIRG Education Fund’s new campaign urging Best Buy, the third-largest appliance retailer in the United States, to better inform its customers about the health risks of gas stoves. Children living in homes with gas cooking have a 42% higher chance of



Boston 25 News

experiencing current asthma symptoms and a 24% higher chance over their lifetime of being diagnosed with asthma.

PIRG's Matt Casale shows off his induction stove during an interview with Boston 25 News.

“When making a costly, long-term decision like purchasing a kitchen appliance, consumers deserve to have all the information that’s out there,” said Matt Casale, environment campaigns director for our national research partner U.S. PIRG Education Fund. “Especially when it comes to potential threats to the health of our families.”

Our national network’s delivery of more than 4,500 petition signatures to Best Buy follows a surge of new media attention on the issue, as well as a Stanford study indicating that gas stoves are even more harmful to our health and our climate than previously thought.

GO PAPERLESS!

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50
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NCPIRG 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.

BEYOND PLASTIC

NCPIRG calls on Gov. Cooper to reduce plastic waste

Imagine a North Carolina with less plastic waste polluting our parks and beaches. On Feb. 15, NCPIRG and a coalition of environmental groups called on Gov. Roy Cooper to take our state a step closer to that reality. The North Carolina Plastic Waste Reduction Coalition, which is run by NCPIRG, delivered a letter to the governor urging him to use executive action to curb plastic waste in state agencies—the latest in a larger effort by the coalition to reduce waste in the state.

From hosting educational events for local activists, to phone banking the governor’s office, to even organizing plastic waste cleanups across the state, our coalition is using a variety of approaches to make this campaign as successful as possible.



Students gather to help clean up litter around Jordan Lake in Apex, North Carolina.

“There is no reason that something we use for just a few minutes like a plastic bag or foam takeout container should be able to threaten our environment, wildlife and health for hundreds of years,” said NCPIRG State Director Katie Craig.

FEATURED STAFF



Katie Craig: *Katie directs NCPIRG’s statewide campaign strategy, organizational development, research, communication, and legislative advocacy. She was born and raised in Raleigh, North Carolina, and prior to her current role, she was the Organizing Director for NCPIRG Campus Action, running NCPIRG’s campus program across the state.*