

# PennPIRG



A group of PIRG volunteers investigated—and they tracked Amazon’s plastic packaging to some surprising places. Photo credit: Oceana, used by permission

## BEYOND PLASTIC

# Are Amazon’s packages as recyclable as it claims?

Amazon claims that many of the packages the company delivers are widely recyclable, either through curbside recycling programs or store drop-off. But are they really?

A group of PIRG staff and volunteers in California investigated—and found that, even when we followed Amazon’s guidelines, the packaging we tried to recycle ended up in some surprising places. Spoiler alert: Not the local recycling center. Here’s what happened:

Whether your Amazon package arrives in a cardboard box stuffed with plastic air pillows, a paper mailing envelope, or a plastic mailing envelope, it all comes labeled with that familiar “chasing arrows” recycling symbol. It also directs you to a website, [how2recycle.info](http://how2recycle.info), to learn more about how to recycle it.

Cardboard boxes and paper mailers have a stan-

dard chasing arrows symbol, which indicates the product is widely recyclable and can be placed in most curbside bins.

The plastic mailing envelope and plastic air pillows have the same chasing arrows symbol. But on this packaging, the symbol contains the phrase “store drop-off.”

This slight difference in labeling suggests that yes, the product is recyclable, but it can’t be placed in your curbside bin. Instead, you need to go online to look up the closest store drop-off location that accepts plastic bags.

### Where does the deposited plastic actually go?

To find out, the PIRG volunteers put small electronic tracking devices into Amazon

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

FALL 2023

## ARE AMAZON'S PACKAGES RECYCLABLE? CONT.



*PIRG staff deliver comments to the EPA to cut mercury pollution.*

bubble-lined plastic bags or air pillows, both of which are labeled for store drop-off, and dropped them in different plastic recycling drop-off bins across the greater Los Angeles area, in sites all recommended by [how2recycle.info](http://how2recycle.info).

Of the 10 plastic items dropped off in recycling bins with a tracker, four ended up in a landfill, two ended up in a waste transfer center (meaning they're likely headed to a landfill), two went to out-of-state or out-of-country recycling centers, and two were last tracked in the Port of Los Angeles headed to who knows where. None of them ended up in California recycling centers.

### What does this mean for recycling plastic packaging?

Though some of the plastic items did end up in a recycling center, it's a problem that none of them went to a local in-state recycling center.

Rather than clean up our own mess, we're simply shipping it to other states or other countries. And because our regulators don't have jurisdiction outside of the U.S., sending our plastic to other countries makes it even harder to know if it's actually getting recycled.

Amazon's system for recycling its packaging—which demands considerable time and effort from the consumer—is failing.

### Eliminate single-use plastic packaging

No matter how much Amazon and others say their packages are "recyclable," plastic never has been widely recycled and likely never will.

According to one estimate, in 2021 alone Amazon generated over 700 million pounds of plastic waste. That's enough to wrap the Earth in plastic air pillows 800 times over.

The better approach to plastic packaging is to just stop using it. That's why PIRG is calling on Amazon to eliminate single-use plastic in their shipments in the U.S.

Amazon has already committed to stop using most single-use plastic in shipments within Germany and India. And the company has announced a plan to phase out its padded shipping bags in the U.S., but it's failed to specify when.

It's time for Amazon to commit to phasing out plastic packaging in the U.S. Add your name to our petition on our website.

## NEWS BRIEFS

### KIDS' HEALTH

#### We're making your voice heard on mercury pollution

Mercury is dangerous—it can do serious damage to a child's developing brain. Yet we still allow it to pour from the smokestacks of coal-fired power plants. And mercury isn't the only toxic substance being pumped out of coal-fired power plants. Lead, nickel and arsenic are too.

The good news: The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has proposed new rules that will cut back on these toxic emissions by about two-thirds—a lifesaving difference for communities in the shadow of fossil fuel plants.

Not everyone is on board with these common-sense measures. Powerful senators are pushing back, so we and other groups in our national network delivered more than 42,900 public comments to the EPA in support of the strongest possible rules to rein in mercury and other toxic pollution.

The best way to cut this kind of toxic pollution out of our lives would be to stop relying on fossil fuels for power at all. But for right now, strengthening toxic pollution standards and re-

#### 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

ducing the amount of mercury in our air is the best way to protect our health and the health of our children and grandchildren.

### HEALTH CARE

#### **New guide helps people avoid, dispute unnecessary medical bills**

As health care prices in the United States hit an all-time high and continue to grow, they strain many personal budgets. More than 100 million people in the country now carry some form of medical debt. While the Biden administration is beginning to address medical debt through regulation on things such as predatory medical credit cards, millions of people need immediate help navigating confusing policies, billing processes and a lack of clear communication with patients.

To help fill this gap, U.S. PIRG Education Fund and Community Catalyst co-authored “Medical Bills: Everything You Need to Know About Your Rights.” The user-friendly guide aims to help any person, either with or without health insurance, to know their rights to avoid unnecessary billing charges, tackle billing errors and handle debt collectors.

“Medical bills are very confusing and knowing how to read them and use your rights can mean saving hundreds or thousands of dollars,” said Patricia Kelmar, senior director of Health Care campaigns for our research partners at U.S. PIRG Education Fund. “The system shouldn’t be and doesn’t need to be this complex. However, it is. We hear from so many people burdened with medical bills, so we want to make sure patients have the information they need.”

You can find the guide at [pennpirgedfund.org](http://pennpirgedfund.org).

### TOXIC THREATS

#### **Major PFAS manufacturer will pay more than \$10 billion for cleanup**

The chemical manufacturer 3M announced in June that it would pay up to \$10.3 billion to settle lawsuits over poly- and perfluoroalkyl (PFAS) contamination of drinking water systems.

These oil- and water-resistant compounds have been used in some firefighting foam and consumer products for decades. The chemicals



are so prevalent in homes and communities that nearly every American has PFAS in their blood.

PFAS are nicknamed “forever chemicals” because they don’t break down in the environment or in the body. Researchers have linked these chemicals to a host of serious health issues, including cancer.

Science tells us that PFAS in food and water puts our health at risk, so it’s unacceptable that companies continue to use them so widely. This settlement will go a long way toward cleaning up drinking water for millions of Americans, but the costs to our health and our environment are likely to be far larger. We need to keep holding polluting industries accountable so taxpayers don’t have to foot the bill.

*Patricia Kelmar, senior director of PIRG’s Health Care campaigns, speaks to the media about protecting consumers from surprise medical bills.*



### **BE AN ADVOCATE FOR OUR NATION’S FUTURE**

Support our work in the public interest by including a gift to PennPIRG or PennPIRG Education Fund in your will, trust or retirement accounts.

For more information call 1-800-841-7299 or send an email to: [plannedgiving@pennpirg.org](mailto:plannedgiving@pennpirg.org)

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# PennPIRG

CITIZEN AGENDA • SUMMER 2023

50  
YEARS

PennPIRG 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.

## RIGHT TO REPAIR

# Report highlights Chromebook waste in schools

Remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic pushed schools to provide their students with their own devices, often low-cost Chromebooks. Now, many of these Chromebooks are failing, according to “Chromebook Churn,” an April 18 report by our research partners at U.S. PIRG Education Fund.

Here’s the problem: Chromebooks have a built-in “death date,” after which software support ends. Once laptops “expire,” they no longer receive updates from Google and can’t access secure websites. For example, expired laptops can’t access online state testing websites. The upshot: Schools have piles of Chromebooks that aren’t broken, but are now e-waste.

“We can’t afford to stay on the disposability treadmill,” said Lucas Gutterman, the author of the report and the



Lucas Gutterman, *Designed to Last* campaign director with PIRG, speaking in front of Google’s offices.

Liam Louis, Elle Vignette Photography

director of U.S. PIRG Education Fund’s *Designed to Last* campaign.

“For the sake of Americans’ wallets and America’s environment, tech devices should last longer. Google can lead the way by slowing down the ‘Chromebook churn.’”

## FEATURED STAFF



**Faye Park:** *As president of the PIRG network, Faye oversees our national campaigns to protect consumers and enable Americans to lead healthier, safer, more secure lives. Faye began her public interest career as a student volunteer with MASSPIRG Students at Williams College, and then later worked with the Student PIRGs in California on campaigns to promote recycling and to help students register to vote.*

Kimball Nelson

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