



Committee: Senate Finance
Legislation: SB0313
Position: FAVORABLE
Date: February 20, 2020

Dear Chair Kelley and Members of the Committee:

The Arundel Rivers Federation requests a favorable report for SB 313, the Plastics and Packaging Reduction Act (“the Act”), a bill carefully crafted to change reckless, wasteful consumption habits of relatively recent origin, but with consequences that will last centuries. The reduction of plastic waste in the environment by banning the routine, thoughtless use of plastic bags at the point of sale will not only improve the aesthetics of our roadways and communities, it will improve the recycling of other waste products, and save local governments and their contractors money. Perhaps most importantly, reducing plastic waste will protect the environment, and benefit human health. These goals can be accomplished while protecting the business community by leveling current playing field in the state that is a hodge-podge of bans and fees of various values and distributions, and covering the cost to retailers of durable carryout paper bags. Accordingly, the Federation urges a favorable report.

Introduction

Some on this committee may have heard of the Great Pacific Trash Gyre. The Gyre is a swirling mass of plastic waste, collecting in the Pacific Ocean, roughly the size of Mexico.¹ Such a massive amount of garbage is hard to fathom and is so far away that one tends to push it out of one’s mind. However, single-use plastics present serious problems here in Maryland too.

In the summer of 2017 Arundel Rivers Federation built a trash trap in a stream flowing into the South River, about two miles from 11 Bladen Street where we sit today. To date, Arundel Rivers Federation staff have collected hundreds of plastic shopping bags from the trap, preventing their entry into the South River and the Chesapeake Bay. Although effective, the trash trap is not perfect, and bags occasionally float around it in heavy storms or make it through the mesh of the trap. Many streams in suburban and urban watershed in the Chesapeake Bay region are similarly littered with plastic bags caught in tree roots and sticks, clogging streams, causing erosion and degrading habitat.

This is one stream flowing into one creek on one small river of the Chesapeake Bay. The Great Pacific Trash Gyre results from a global problem, and we should think globally about plastic waste and our contribution to it. Walk any stream in your district and you are likely to see the same pollution of plastic bags there. Senate Bill 313 is an important way to act locally, and we urge your favorable report.

Litter

Plastic bags festooning street side trees have become so ubiquitous it is hard to even notice anymore. However, if you pay attention while traveling any road in our State or beyond, it will not be long before you spot one. Once you start looking, they are everywhere, wavering in the branches of trees and chain link fences like ghosts. This all-too-familiar disgrace can end with this bill. Once people start planning to bring a bag with them to the store for a few weeks or months, it will become second nature and we will wonder how we ever became so dependent on plastic bags in the first place.

¹ National Geographic- <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2017/07/ocean-plastic-patch-south-pacific-spd/#close>

Recycling and Plastic Bags

In the wake of China's recent refusal to process US recycling products, it has become increasingly clear to local and state governments that plastic bags pose a serious problem for recycling overall, as they clog up the machinery used to sort and process other recyclables.² In Chicago, the City's recycling center estimates the cost of freeing equipment from plastic bags at \$9,500/month.³ Rather than incur the cost, some jurisdictions, like Anne Arundel County, have banned plastic bags from their recycling containers, and despite robust public outreach efforts advising of the ban, must sometimes direct recycling contaminated with plastic bags to the landfill.⁴

The behavior change contemplated by this bill will ensure that less, if any, plastic bags wind up clogging recycling equipment in the State and costing hundreds of thousands of dollars in labor and maintenance costs, or causing otherwise valuable recyclables to be thrown out because of contamination.

Aquatic Life and Human Health

Studies showing the harmful effects of microplastics (like those generated by the disintegration of plastic bags) on aquatic fauna are legion. Anyone who has picked up litter on a beach understands that plastic bags easily break down into tinier and tinier pieces. Eventually these pieces become particles of microplastics and are ingested by marine life. This ingestion has a number of deleterious effects on marine life from oysters and menhaden to pelicans and sea turtles. Microplastics also travel up the food chain from plankton to filter feeders, to the fish we eat, like Rockfish and Atlantic Salmon.⁵ Along the way, plastic particles absorb other toxic pollution, which also makes its way into fish, and then into humans.⁶

Conclusion

There are ample reasons to speed this bill to passage and we have articulated some above. But the big question this committee must answer is: Are the citizens of our state are capable of positive change? I suspect that as legislators, you honorable Delegates long ago decided that the answer to this question is yes. Otherwise, why bother serving a public that is incapable of realizing the goals and requirements of the laws you make?

Arundel Rivers shares the view that positive change is possible, and we suggest that as it pertains to plastic bags, it is necessary. Please vote favorably on SB 313, which will make a positive change in the lives of all Marylanders.

Respectfully submitted,



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² For Example, see Washington D.C.'s policy on plastic bags in recycling here: <https://zerowaste.dc.gov/plasticbagremoval>

³ <https://www.chicagotribune.com/opinion/commentary/ct-plastic-bag-ban-recycling-0731-biz-20150730-story.html>

⁴ <https://www.capitalgazette.com/opinion/columns/ac-ce-column-phipps-20190525-story.html>

⁵ Food Chain Transport of Nanoparticles Affects Behaviour and Fat Metabolism in Fish. Cedervall T, Hansson L-A, (2012). Available at <http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0032254>

⁶ The Complex Interaction between Marine Debris and Toxic Chemicals in the Ocean. Engler, Richard E. Environmental Science & Technology 2012, vol 46. no.22, 12302-12315. Available at <https://pubs.acs.org/doi/abs/10.1021/es3027105>