Responding to the COVID-19 crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced Americans to confront harsh realities—from concern for the health and safety of themselves and their families, to the financial struggles brought on by mass layoffs and a dampened economy.

In response to the crisis, OSPIRG and U.S. PIRG Education Fund, the research and policy arm of our national network, have continued to work—from a safe social distance—for a healthier, safer world, calling for measures to improve our country’s ability to discover and care for COVID-19 cases, to protect consumers from price gouging in the marketplace, and to increase production and distribution of vital medical supplies as rapidly as possible.

Ramping up our testing capacity

When the novel coronavirus made landfall in the United States, health experts warned that there were not enough COVID-19 tests available for all who would need them. The inability to adequately test for the virus left health professionals and lawmakers with an incomplete picture as to the scope of the problem.

OSPIRG, U.S. PIRG Education Fund and our national network called on Adm. Brett Giroir, the head of the government’s coronavirus testing response, to implement a national plan for scaling up our testing capacity as quickly as possible.

OSPIRG and U.S. PIRG Education Fund supported plans crafted by public health experts—including former Food and Drug Administration Commissioners David Kessler, M.D. and Scott Gottlieb, M.D.—for federal leadership to build this testing capacity. The plans included expanding labs and speeding up testing time, national coordination on large-scale purchasing
of testing supplies, and building systems to collect data and identify cases as fast as possible to prevent further spread of the virus.

**Preventing price gouging in a pandemic**

As people rushed to buy hand sanitizer and other critical supplies early on in the outbreak, U.S. PIRG Education Fund released ground-breaking research that revealed massive price gouging on Amazon. The report found that, in February, most surveyed hand sanitizers and face masks saw price surges of more than 50 percent above their 90-day averages. Even 1 in 6 products sold directly by Amazon—not third-party vendors—saw similar spikes.

More than 375,000 people have since joined OSPIRG and our national network in calling on Amazon and other major online marketplaces to implement safeguards that prevent prices from significantly increasing during states of emergency.

Even top officials and lawmakers have joined us in taking action to ensure consumers aren’t taken advantage of during this time of crisis. In letters organized by U.S. PIRG Education Fund, attorneys general from 33 states called on Amazon, Walmart, eBay, Facebook and Craigslist to proactively put a stop to price gouging on their platforms. In April, 346 state legislators from 45 states signed a similar letter sent by U.S. PIRG Education Fund to those same companies.

**Confronting our medical supply shortage**

In response to ventilator supply shortages, OSPIRG and our national network have called on President Trump to fully utilize the Defense Production Act (DPA) and to coordinate distribution of critical medical supplies directly to affected areas. Thousands have signed our network’s petition calling on the president to use the DPA to double the amount of ventilators by mobilizing manufacturers in wartime-scale production efforts. On March 27, the president ordered General Motors to begin producing these lifesaving machines, but more needs to be done to fully meet demand.

Across the country, hospitals have struggled to get the supplies they need to protect frontline workers and care for COVID-19 patients. Our national network recruited 116 mayors and county executives to sign onto a letter urging the Trump administration to centrally coordinate procurement and distribution of essential supplies to everyone who needs them.

The COVID-19 pandemic has upended our way of life. As we confront these challenges, OSPIRG and U.S. PIRG Education Fund are committed to championing the policies that will best protect Americans’ health, safety and well-being in this time of crisis.

**NEWS BRIEFS**

**OUR 2020 LEGISLATIVE GOALS**

**A recap of the 2020 legislative session**

OSPIRG entered 2020 with an ambitious agenda for the 35-day state legislative session. Unfortunately, a walkout by some lawmakers opposed to climate change legislation prevented the Legislature from achieving a quorum. Despite this, we built support in the Legislature for three public interest reforms that we’ll continue to advocate for in the future.

First on the list was controlling rising prescription drug costs in Oregon. Building on progress from previous years, we supported a bill to allow the importation of safe drugs approved by Canada’s FDA equivalent, which would result in price relief for Oregon consumers.

We’re also working to tackle the student loan crisis, as 56 percent of four-year-degree college
students graduated with debt in 2017. We supported a bill that would regulate student loan servicers in Oregon and prohibit deceptive practices.

Finally, we looked to end the nicotine trap by supporting a bill that would ban remote sales of vaping products, making it more difficult for underage users to purchase vaping devices.

FOOD SAFETY

How safe is our food? Produce recalls are down, but meat and poultry are sky-high


While safety recalls for produce and processed food from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration have declined 34 percent since 2016—when new safety standards were implemented—recalls for meat and poultry have rocketed up 65 percent since 2013, finds the “How Safe is Our Food?” report.

Upticks in recalls don’t necessarily mean our food has gotten less safe. In fact, they could mean our food safety systems have gotten better at identifying dangerous foods. But, says PIRG Consumer Watchdog Grace Brombach, that point is moot: Contaminations should be caught before recalls become necessary.

“Americans should be confident that their food is safe and not contaminated by dangerous bacteria like E. coli and salmonella,” said Grace.

U.S. PIRG Education Fund is advocating for improvements in our food safety systems—including increased testing, monitoring and traceability for pathogens.

BAN ROUNDUP

EPA review insists glyphosate does not cause cancer

Despite a wealth of evidence to the contrary, the Trump administration’s Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has declared that glyphosate is not a carcinogen.

On Jan. 30, the EPA finalized its review of the main active ingredient in Monsanto’s ubiquitous weedkiller, Roundup. Despite its designation as a probable human carcinogen by the World Health Organization’s cancer research agency, the EPA reaffirmed its stance that glyphosate is not a cancer agent.

The determination is at odds with the verdicts of three U.S. juries, which have awarded hundreds of millions in damages to four plaintiffs since 2018, after determining the weedkiller to be a substantial factor in causing their cancers.

The EPA’s failure to recognize glyphosate as a probable human carcinogen likely rules out a federal ban—an action that countries including Germany and France took in 2019. To protect the health of our communities, OSPIRG and our national network are continuing to lead efforts to ban Roundup in states and cities, unless and until it’s proven safe.
THANKS TO YOU
Dear OSPIRG member,
From a safe social distance, we’re continuing our work for a healthier, safer world. From responding to the COVID-19 crisis, to improving our food safety systems, to banning toxic weed killers and harmful single-use plastics—your support is what makes it all possible. Thank you,

Addressing our plastic pollution problem means stemming the flow of plastic into our communities, landfills and environment.

On Feb. 11, U.S. Sen. Tom Udall and U.S. Rep. Alan Lowenthal introduced legislation that would re-envision how we handle our plastic waste. The first measure outlined in the proposed Break Free From Plastic Act is simple: make less of it. The legislation would phase out unnecessary single-use plastics, which overburden our landfills and pollute our environment. The legislation also provides funding for recycling and composting infrastructure, and would shift the financial burden of managing waste and recyclables from town and city governments to manufacturers.

“We’re inundated by plastic pollution, but we make more each year,” said Alex Truelove, our national network’s Beyond Plastic campaign director. “Finally, we have a federal bill that offers real solutions, drawing from successful ordinances across the globe.”

TOP STORY:
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BEYOND PLASTIC
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Charlie Fisher
State Director
info@ospirg.org