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 46 priority sites in Washington 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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Putting the financial burden of cleanup back where it belongs: On the polluters themselves

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

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.

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

“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!
Sign up for the latest WashPIRG news, updates and alerts sent directly to your inbox at: washpirg.org

BE AN ADVOCATE FOR OUR NATION’S FUTURE

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

For more information call 1-800-841-7299 or send an email to: plannedgiving@WashPIRG.org
How a grocery giant can move beyond plastic

Actions speak louder than words. That’s the message PIRG and our supporters are sending to Whole Foods, the grocery giant that, when it comes to plastic waste, isn’t living up to its environmentally friendly reputation.

On Jan. 3, WashPIRG and our national network released a detailed list of 10 steps Whole Foods can take right now to stop being a part of our country’s plastic pollution crisis and instead become part of the solution. Among the most effective (and most urgent) actions: eliminating single-use plastic produce packaging, embracing reusable options, and being more transparent about packaging use.

“Over the past year, we’ve gathered almost 80,000 petition signatures from Whole Foods shoppers who care about their health and the environment and want the store to eliminate single-use plastic packaging,” said Matt Casale, director of PIRG’s environment campaigns.

Whole Foods shoppers who care about their health and the environment and want the store to eliminate single-use plastic packaging,” said Matt Casale, director of PIRG’s environment campaigns.

Janet Domenitz, the executive director at our partner organization MASSPIRG, advocates in front of Whole Foods for moving beyond plastic.

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.