Finding common ground and making real progress

Dear U.S. PIRG member,

Sometimes people ask if it’s frustrating to be involved in political advocacy right now.

Sure, we’ve seen the divisions in our country deepen in recent years, and we’ve watched them harden in Washington, D.C., in ways that make positive action on issues that affect Americans’ lives nearly impossible. That’s frustrating.

But from the beginning, PIRG’s approach has been to make progress wherever we can, whenever we can, as best we can—even when things are gridlocked in D.C. That’s as true today as it was in 1971, when PIRG began.

Over the last few years, we’ve focused our energy at the state and local levels, winning changes that are documented in these pages.

For example, our Beyond Plastic campaign helped win bans on single-use plastics in cities and communities across the country. In 2019, six more states passed plastic bag bans, and Maine, Maryland and Vermont became the first states to ban plastic foam food containers.

As we work to improve air quality and cut down on climate emissions, our Transform Transportation campaign is winning support for public transit, electric buses, electric cars and other clean, healthy alternatives to wasting billions on new or expanded highways.

To empower consumers and reduce waste, our Right to Repair campaign called on companies to remove barriers that prevent us from repairing their products. Our advocates and coalition partners put model legislation to guarantee our right to repair in front of 20 state legislatures.

Our leaders in Washington should be doing much more on these and other issues. But we don’t have time to brood about their failures. There are too many opportunities elsewhere to make progress for our health, our safety and the quality of our lives.

Thanks to you, our staff and other supporters are seizing every opportunity we can to win positive results for the public.

P.S. Our staff quickly shifted to working remotely as the COVID-19 crisis swept the United States. But rest assured, we have continued our work to advocate for you and for a healthier, safer world.
Working to ban Roundup

Since the World Health Organization labeled glyphosate, the main ingredient in Roundup, a probable human carcinogen, we’ve been warning the public and working to ban Roundup unless and until it can be proven safe.

In 2019, two more juries ruled that there was enough evidence to hold Roundup culpable for causing the cancers of three plaintiffs, making that three guilty verdicts since August 2018. More than 42,700 farmers, landscapers, home gardeners and others filed lawsuits claiming Roundup’s makers knew of its cancer risk but failed to warn consumers. And the list of U.S. cities that have banned or restricted glyphosate-based herbicides continues to grow. But Roundup is still putting our health at risk, and more needs to be done.

Public education, member action strengthen call to ban Roundup

The more we educate the public about Monsanto’s weed killer Roundup and other glyphosate-based products, the more support we find for banning them—the residue of which can be found practically everywhere.

In July 2019, U.S. PIRG and our national network of state PIRGs kicked off a summer public education drive in 15 states.

“We’re doing all we can to get the facts to legislators about why we should ban Roundup until and unless it’s proven safe,” said Kara Cook-Schultz, director of our Ban Roundup campaign. “The support and action of our members are making it easier to get local decision-makers to listen.”

Over the course of the summer, our canvassers enlisted more than 47,000 citizens nationwide to join our call for state leaders to ban Roundup and other glyphosate-based products.

Studies find weed killer in beer and wine

The last thing you want to think about when you pour yourself a glass of wine or a cold beer is whether it contains even small amounts of a potentially carcinogenic weed killer.

But the use of glyphosate, the main ingredient in Monsanto’s Roundup, is now so widespread that the chemical is found virtually everywhere—including, as a Feb. 22, 2019, U.S. PIRG Education Fund report found, in 19 of the 20 beer and wine products tested.

“No matter the efforts of brewers and vintners, [U.S. PIRG Education Fund] found that it is incredibly difficult to avoid ... that consumers will likely drink glyphosate at every happy hour and backyard barbecue around the country,” Kara told USA Today.

U.S. PIRG and our national network of state PIRGs are calling on federal, state and local officials to ban the use of glyphosate. We’ll drink to that.
Moving beyond plastic

With your support this past year, U.S. PIRG and our national network of state PIRGs have made progress to move our country beyond single-use plastic by getting rid of the most harmful waste and stopping the use of things we truly don’t need.

Not one, not two, but six more states banned single-use plastic bags
The number of statewide plastic bag bans in the U.S. multiplied six-fold in 2019, with Maine, New York, Vermont, Connecticut, Delaware and Oregon adding themselves to the list.

The states joined California in requiring retailers and grocers to replace single-use plastic bags with reusable or paper ones. Americans currently throw away 100 billion plastic bags every year, or 300 bags per person. We use these bags for just a few minutes, but they persist in the environment and impact public health for centuries to come.

“These states are leading the country in addressing plastic pollution,” said Beyond Plastic Campaign Director Alex Truelove. “Clearly, momentum is building on this issue. But these states cannot tackle our plastic pollution crisis alone.”

Together with our national network, U.S. PIRG is running campaigns to ban single-use plastic bags and other harmful plastics in states across the country.

Maryland and Maine became the first states to ban plastic foam. Who’s next?
In 2019, Maryland and Maine became the first states in the U.S. to put bans on foam food containers on the books, but other states aren’t far behind.

On May 24, Maryland became the nation’s second state to ban polystyrene foam cups and containers, after Gov. Larry Hogan let the bill become law without his signature. Maine passed a polystyrene foam ban earlier in the year. Maryland’s ban will go into effect on July 1, 2020, with Maine’s taking effect less than a year later.

“These two states did something historic in becoming the first in the country to ban single-use plastic foam,” said Alex. “Other states should seize the opportunity and follow suit.”

Legislatures in Oregon, New Jersey, Connecticut and Vermont are considering similar bans.

“Nothing we use for five minutes should be allowed to pollute our planet for hundreds of years,” said Alex. “I’m happy to know Maine and Maryland agree. Who’s next?”
In 2019, Transform Transportation Campaign Director Matt Casale advocated for states across the country to transition their polluting diesel bus fleets to clean, electric power.

Replacing all of America’s school and transit buses with electric buses could avoid an average of 7.3 million tons of greenhouse gas emissions each year.

Transforming our transportation system

For our health, our safety and our children’s future, we need to make our transportation systems cleaner and more efficient. That’s why, in 2019, we launched our Transform Transportation campaign to reduce the need to drive and to electrify buses and cars — because we believe the easiest, cheapest and most pleasant ways to travel should also be the cleanest and healthiest.

Are electric buses ready to roll? Report says yes, based on six early-adopter cities.

A bus that runs on clean electricity sounds like a great idea. But it comes with a few questions, including: Is it reliable? And is it affordable?

According to a 2019 report authored by U.S. PIRG Education Fund and co-released by U.S. PIRG, entitled “Electric Buses in America,” the answer to these questions is “yes,” based on the experience of six early municipal adopters ranging from Chicago (population: 2.7 million) to Seneca, South Carolina (population: 8,340). The report also highlights lessons from more challenging rollouts that regions and cities can learn from and apply as they electrify their bus fleets.

Some of the challenges faced by the cities included mechanical issues and weather problems. But here’s the most positive sign: All six cities plan to move forward with electric buses.

We backed a bill that could keep school buses from harming kids’ health.

On the way to and from school every day, more than 25 million children breathe air polluted by the yellow buses that take them there.

Diesel pollution stunts the growth of kids’ lungs and worsens asthma symptoms, and has also been linked to poorer academic performance. That’s why, on June 6, 2019, seven U.S. senators introduced the Clean School Bus Act, which would commit $1 billion over five years to help school districts transition to all-electric buses.

“Our kids shouldn’t have to breathe dirty, dangerous air just to get to school,” said our Transform Transportation campaign director, Matt Casale. “We applaud and endorse this proposal because it will help protect the health of America’s children.”
Stopping the overuse of antibiotics

The idea that our antibiotics might no longer work in the near future is alarming. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimate that at least 35,000 Americans die every year from drug-resistant infections—that’s one person dying every 15 minutes. Other researchers suggest the number of deaths could be nearly five times as many. It’s clear that we need to take urgent action to stop the overuse of antibiotics and keep our life-saving medicines working when we need them.

U.S. PIRG and our national network have been hard at work for the last five years to preserve the effectiveness of antibiotics, building a network of leading health professional advocates, and convincing the country’s biggest restaurant chains to stop serving meat raised on the routine use of antibiotics. Here’s some of the ongoing work you’ve helped make possible in 2019.

45,000 tell the EPA: Don’t let growers spray antibiotics on citrus trees
Antibiotic overuse is becoming a global health crisis, threatening to make life-saving medicines ineffective. Yet the Trump administration is moving to allow growers to spray 650,000 pounds annually of these life-saving medicines on citrus trees.

On March 13, 2019, advocates from the research and policy arm of our national network, U.S. PIRG Education Fund, delivered signatures from more than 45,000 people asking the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to deny the proposal.

“The more you use antibiotics, the greater the risk that bacteria resistant to the drugs will flourish and spread. The bottom line is that the potential problems created by spraying massive amounts
of streptomycin on citrus fields could outweigh the original problem the EPA wants to solve,” said Matt Wellington, who directs U.S. PIRG Education Fund’s Stop the Overuse of Antibiotics campaign.

Spraying antibiotics on citrus fields is supposed to combat citrus greening, but it won’t cure or prevent the spread of the disease. On top of that, the EPA has clearly not fully considered the consequences of this unprecedented antibiotic use.

**We launched a campaign calling on Wendy’s to ‘Hold the Antibiotics’ from its beef supply chain**

How can the country’s third-largest burger chain help save the cornerstone of modern medicine? By buying only beef raised without the routine use of antibiotics.

On March 28, 2019, U.S. PIRG launched our campaign to convince Wendy’s to do just that. The CDC now estimates that 35,000 Americans die each year due to antibiotic-resistant infections. Large meat buyers such as Wendy’s can help keep our antibiotics effective by only sourcing beef from livestock farms that don’t overuse our medically important antibiotics.

“We can’t waste life-saving medicines to produce cheap beef. Wendy’s can use its buying power to help move the beef industry away from overusing antibiotics,” said Matt.

Wendy’s no longer serves chicken raised on medically important antibiotics. But the chain earned only a D- on the 2019 Chain Reaction scorecard authored by our research partner U.S. PIRG Education Fund, which graded top burger chains on antibiotics use in their beef supply chains.

**Superbugs Unplugged: U.S. PIRG launched a podcast about antibiotic resistance**

Get ready for some alarming stories—which are all the more alarming because they’re true.

On Nov. 14, 2019, U.S. PIRG and the Antibiotic Resistance Action Center (ARAC) of George Washington University launched “Superbugs Unplugged,” a podcast that will dive into the alarming issue of rising antibiotic resistance. Matt co-hosts the podcast with Dr. Lance Price of ARAC.

“[It’s just] totally baffling to me [that] we treat these drugs, not as the life-saving medicines that they are, but as tools in agriculture and wherever else we’re using them,” said Matt in the podcast’s inaugural episode. “I’m really excited for this podcast ... to be a forum for how we address this problem comprehensively.”

The approach of an era when, because of overuse, our antibiotics might no longer work, and what used to be common, treatable infections may become deadly, is truly terrifying. Our podcast will educate the public and promote solutions to avoid this nightmare scenario. ■
PIRG Consumer Watchdog on the case

For more than 40 years, our national network has been warning consumers about hidden dangers and helping them to protect themselves. In 2019, our Consumer Watchdog team continued to be on the case: We alerted the public to major food, drug and product recalls, worked to get dangerous products off of store shelves, and more to keep consumers healthy, safe and secure.

How safe is our food? Not safe enough, says PIRG Consumer Watchdog team, and it’s trending in the wrong direction.

Unsafe food recalls in the U.S. are trending the wrong way. From 2013 to 2017, they were up 10 percent overall, and up a whopping 83 percent for the most hazardous meat and poultry recalls.

These were the chief findings in 2019’s “How Safe Is Our Food?” report, written by U.S. PIRG Education Fund—the research and policy arm of our national network—and co-released by U.S. PIRG on Jan. 17. The report reached millions of people through coverage on CBS This Morning, NBC News and USA Today.

“We need to be looking for these farm-to-fork preventative solutions that are logical,” PIRG Consumer Watchdog Adam Garber told USA Today. “By doing that, we can protect people’s health.”

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that 1 in 6 people in the U.S. contract foodborne illnesses each year. To stem the problem, our Consumer Watchdog team is calling for public health standards for agricultural water, a ban on salmonella in meat, and better recalls to get dangerous food out of people’s homes.
PIRG Consumer Watchdog found deadly infant sleepers still in use at day cares

Even PIRG Consumer Watchdog Adam has to stay alert for dangerous products: He discovered recalled inclined sleepers at his infant son’s day care in May 2019.

“They were still using the Fisher-Price Rock ’n Plays, which were recalled back in April,” he told ABC Action News.Adam immediately alerted the day care to the recall and the Rock ’n Plays have since been removed. But the incident reveals fundamental flaws in our recall system.

“We do a great job, for the most part, of preventing the sale of devices or products that have been recalled, but we have a long way to go to remove them from people’s homes and child care facilities.”

According to a July 2019 U.S. PIRG Education Fund report that surveyed 376 child care facilities, 1 in 10 indicated they were still using at least one Fisher-Price Rock ‘n Play. Inclined infant sleepers have led to the deaths of more than 73 infants and contradict medical guidance that babies should be placed on flat, hard surfaces with no restraints for sleeping.

U.S. PIRG Education Fund’s work to raise the profile of these dangerous sleepers contributed to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission taking action.

In the wake of the Capital One data breach, Ed Mierzwinski and Adam Garber explain how to protect your credit

Were you affected by the Capital One breach, one of the largest thefts of data from any bank to date?

On July 29, 2019, a massive data theft at Capital One was revealed, including the exposure of social security numbers and other data of more than 100 million people. So what can you do to protect yourself from this and other breaches? As Adam told The Wall Street Journal, “Freeze your credit immediately.”

Ed Mierzwinski, senior director of our federal consumer program, explained to C-SPAN’s Washington Journal, “Your social security number and your birthday are ... [your] financial DNA. They have a very long shelf life.”

Even if you’ve never had your identity stolen, it only takes one breach for hackers to cause you headaches and potential financial harm. Protecting yourself now can save you from significant financial issues down the road, even if you don’t bank with Capital One.

Remember: “Freeze your credit immediately.”
Standing up for our right to repair the things we own

You buy stuff. It breaks or doesn’t work right. You could throw it away and buy new stuff, but you’d rather repair it. But then you find out you can’t do it yourself—you can’t even bring it to a third party repair shop. You have to bring it back to the original company, which can charge an arm and a leg because there’s no competition—and sometimes they just won’t fix it. So you decide to throw the thing away.

This means more cost to consumers, and also means more waste. Americans dispose of 416,000 cell phones per day, and only 15 to 20 percent of electronic waste is recycled.

We imagine a different kind of system, where instead of throwing things out, we reuse, salvage and rebuild. But that means taking on the big companies who would push us into buying more and throwing more away. We’re working to give everyone access to the parts, tools and service information we need to repair products so we can keep things in use and reduce waste.

A year of milestone progress for our right to repair

It’s not as easy to repair our stuff as it should be, but after two years of running our Right to Repair campaign, we’re seeing some progress.

In 2019, the Right to Repair campaign, led by PIRG, Repair.org and iFixit, worked to get our model bills in front of 20 state legislatures, made our case before the Federal Trade Commission and the House Judiciary Committee, and convinced Apple and Microsoft to take small but positive steps toward making it easier to repair their products.
“Running a campaign opposed by companies worth $2.5 trillion makes any progress hard-won,” said Nathan Proctor, PIRG’s Right to Repair campaign director. “But when I think back on what we’ve been able to accomplish, it gives me confidence that we can overcome the naysayers and secure our right to fix our own products.”

Congress began investigating how Apple restricts our right to repair
Congress is taking a look at the ways that Apple makes it harder to fix our iPhones, iPads and other products as a part of a larger antitrust investigation.

On Sept. 13, 2019, the House Judiciary Committee delivered a bipartisan request to Apple CEO Tim Cook for documents related to its investigation into possible anti-competitive practices, including its practices regarding independent repair of Apple products.

“The bottom line? Apple and others “should cooperate, support independent repair and avoid exposing themselves to regulatory and legal risks.”

Nathan Proctor advocated for our right to repair at the FTC
We’ve been telling everybody who will listen that the companies that make electronics and other products should make it easier for us to repair our stuff when it breaks. In July, we got to tell the Federal Trade Commission (FTC).

Nathan was a featured speaker on July 16 at the FTC’s “Nixing the Fix” workshop, which explored restrictions on repair.

“I love Star Trek. They literally have six devices on Star Trek to do what one smartphone does,” said Nathan. “We buy these incredible $1,000 handheld supercomputers and treat them as disposable, (hopefully) recycling them for commodity value? That’s absurd and shows that something is going wrong here. One of the factors ... is the way in which the repair and maintenance of devices are severely limited by the manufacturers.”

Nathan delivered petitions signed by 7,900 supporters to the FTC calling for action to make it easier to repair our stuff.
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