U.S. PIRG

2018 ANNUAL REPORT
Finding common ground and making real progress

Dear U.S. PIRG Member,

Given the partisan rancor in our nation, one might reasonably wonder if it’s still possible for Americans to find common ground and solve problems.

It is. And we have examples:

1. Consumers, patients, doctors and nurses from across the country came together to stop the food industry’s overuse of antibiotics, a practice that leads to antibiotic-resistant bacteria—or “superbugs”—that cut short tens of thousands of lives each year. This wasn’t about red America or blue America, it was all Americans sharing a common interest that convinced McDonald’s to commit to reducing antibiotics in its beef supply chain. (See page 3 for more.)

2. From Washington to Massachusetts, growing numbers of people agree that it’s time to say goodbye to the single-use consumer plastics that burden our landfills and litter our neighborhoods. Our national network helped win bans on the worst type of single-use plastics, polystyrene foam cups and containers, which are toxic and non-biodegradable. (See page 10.)

3. A bipartisan majority in the last Congress approved a law allowing consumers to freeze their personal credit reports for free—the simplest and most effective step we can take to prevent identity theft. (See page 7 for how our Consumer Watchdog team made it easier for consumers to protect ourselves.)

Many threats to our health and safety cut across political divides. When we get beyond the filter bubbles that inhibit real dialogue in Washington, D.C., and on social media, we can find support for solutions to these problems and others like them.

Your support for U.S. PIRG is helping to bring people together and find answers for a healthier, cleaner, safer and more secure future for all Americans. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Photo credits: (cover, clockwise from top) Staff, Staff, Ricky Osborne, CBS News; (above) Kimball Nelson Photography.
Defending consumer protections

We should be able to save, invest and manage our money without fear of being tricked, trapped or otherwise ripped off by the banks or institutions we trust with our financial future. That’s why it’s so important that we protect the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB).

After the Great Recession, U.S. PIRG and our national network were instrumental in helping establish the CFPB—a watchdog agency devoted to creating and enforcing fair, clear and transparent rules to protect consumers. But the Trump administration is pushing to weaken or even get rid of it.

Keeping the Consumer Bureau intact
The CFPB holds big banks, debt collectors, lenders and others accountable if they try to take advantage of consumers. Our national network helped spearhead the creation of the Consumer Bureau. Now, we’re standing up for consumer protection once again.

Last year, we reached out to people across the country about the urgent threats to our financial wellbeing, and about the great work the Consumer Bureau is doing on our behalf. We gathered thousands of petition signatures, sent emails and made phone calls to Congress to show our support for the CFPB.

Strengthening consumer protections in states
State attorneys general have expressed concern about the CFPB’s new leadership, and several have promised to double down on efforts to enforce consumer protection laws at the state and federal levels.

In December, U.S. PIRG Education Fund released our “Positioned to Protect” report, the third in our series of reports highlighting the role of the CFPB in protecting consumers, highlighting how states can strengthen consumer protections. Some attorneys general have established agencies similar to the CFPB at the state level. A number of local governments have implemented new education and enforcement programs, and the Cities for Financial Empowerment Fund is helping develop new projects to ensure that citizens are protected in the marketplace.

U.S. PIRG and our national network are advocating for state and local governments to take charge of policing financial markets when the CFPB can’t provide adequate protections, and providing consumers with tools they can use to protect themselves.
Stopping the misuse of life-saving antibiotics

Because of your support this past year, U.S. PIRG and our national network were able to help reduce the overuse of antibiotics on factory farms.

The overuse and misuse of antibiotics in humans, animals and agriculture is creating “superbugs” that are resistant to treatment. The World Health Organization has named antibiotic resistance one of the top 10 global threats to human health. According to an estimate from researchers at Washington University School of Medicine, as many as 162,000 people die from multidrug-resistant infections annually in the U.S., making these infections the third leading cause of death.

U.S. PIRG and our national network have gathered support from activists, corporate actors and health professionals across the country to address the looming dangers of antibiotic resistance. A group of physicians and health experts, The Health Professional Action Network, is ready to be our voice in the media, in state capitols, and wherever we need to counter misleading claims or advocate for new solutions.

In honor of World Antibiotics Awareness Week in November, U.S. PIRG Education Fund featured seven infectious disease physicians, specialists, scholars and pediatricians from our Health Professionals Action Network in an eight-part video series. These champions of medicine joined staff to discuss antibiotic resistance and the need to reduce antibiotic use in human and veterinary medicine.
On Nov. 15, U.S. PIRG Education Fund joined a group of panelists at Harvard University to discuss the future of antibiotics. Speakers presented solutions such as stopping the routine use of antibiotics on factory farms, investing more time and money into developing new antibiotics, and implementing legislation that curbs the overuse of antibiotics.

Setting off a chain reaction
In October, U.S. PIRG Education Fund released our collaborative “Chain Reaction IV” report grading the top 25 U.S. burger chains on their antibiotics policies. Most, including McDonald’s, received failing grades. BurgerFi and Shake Shack were the only two chains to earn “A” grades for sourcing beef raised without routine antibiotics.

The routine use of antibiotics in livestock significantly contributes to the spread of antibiotic resistance. In fact, nearly two-thirds of the medically important antibiotics sold in the U.S. are intended for use in livestock and poultry operations.

Fast food restaurants, as one of the largest markets for meat in the U.S., can play an instrumental role in pushing producers to use antibiotics responsibly if they commit to only purchasing beef raised without routine antibiotics.

Throughout 2018, U.S. PIRG and our national network called on McDonald’s to phase routine antibiotics out of their beef supply chains.

McDonald’s made a commitment
Antibiotics vital to human medicine are routinely given to animals to help them survive crowded, stressful and unsanitary conditions, regardless of whether the animals are actually sick, threatening the efficacy of our life-saving medications. That’s why U.S. PIRG and our national network have been calling on fast food chains such as McDonald’s to phase routine antibiotics out of their beef supply chains.

And in December, McDonald’s showed us it was listening. The company committed to monitor and set reduction targets for antibiotic use in its global beef supply chain by the end of 2020. Whether you eat at McDonald’s or not, this is a huge victory for public health.

“The Golden Arches just raised the bar for responsible antibiotic use in meat production. We can’t afford to misuse these precious medicines. Otherwise, we risk losing our ability to treat life-threatening infections,” said Matt Wellington, director of our Stop the Overuse of Antibiotics campaign. “McDonald’s new commitment is a promising step forward that will help preserve antibiotics for the future, and that’s something we should all be happy about.”

Infectious disease specialist and member of the Health Professionals Action Network Dr. Sheryl Henderson talking about the dangers of antibiotic overuse in U.S. PIRG Education Fund’s video series for Antibiotics Awareness Week.

The routine use of antibiotics on livestock is creating antibiotic-resistant “superbugs” that are threatening human life.
U.S. PIRG Education Fund President Faye Park spoke with CBS News following the release of our report which found asbestos in three different children’s makeup products sold by Claire’s.

Protecting consumers from dangerous products

In 2018, U.S. PIRG Education Fund and our Consumer Watchdog team conducted independent testing and research to identify dangers that can pose risks to our health, safety or well-being; and worked hard to get dangerous products off of store shelves.

There are more than 80,000 chemicals on the U.S. market, many of which were never tested for their health impacts. In the absence of government action on some of these products, retailers are stepping up to protect consumers.

Last year, 31-year-old Drew Wynne, the proud owner of a cold brew coffee business, died from toxic fumes while properly using a methylene chloride-based paint stripper. After hearing Drew’s story in May, U.S. PIRG Education Fund joined a coalition in an effort to get dangerous paint strippers off store shelves.

Along with our coalition partners, we sent Lowe’s more than 7,000 petition signatures, urging the company to drop these deadly products. Lowe’s listened, announcing it would do so by the end of 2018. Next, we shifted our attention to Home Depot and Walmart. After receiving thousands of comments from our network, both retailers announced plans to phase out these paint strippers.
Last year, our national network found dangers in household items, school supplies, and some of the most popular toys in the country.

1. We helped convince Lowe’s, Home Depot and Walmart to commit to getting toxic paint strippers off store shelves.

2. We found health threats such as asbestos, lead and other chemicals in school supplies.

3. We found slime toys with hazardous levels of boron, toys that are choking hazards without warning labels, and “connected toys” that may disclose private data.

Stay up to date on the latest threats to consumers with the PIRG Consumer Watchdog. Sign up for consumer alerts at www.uspirg.org.

Toxics in kids’ products

In March, U.S. PIRG Education Fund released its “In Your Face” report, which found asbestos in three different shimmery makeup products sold at Claire’s, with one containing more than 150,000 fibers of asbestos per gram of product. Asbestos is an extremely dangerous substance that can increase the risk of skin cancer and cause lung cancer, mesothelioma and even death.

Our network quickly alerted Claire’s to these test results, and asked the company to recall the items and inform customers immediately, but representatives refused. U.S. PIRG is now calling on Congress to pass legislation that will protect our kids by requiring appropriate testing and labeling of cosmetics.

After testing dozens of markers, crayons, binders and more, U.S. PIRG Education Fund found some common school supplies containing asbestos, lead or other dangerous substances. Released on Aug. 7, our “Safer School Supplies Shopping Guide” warned consumers about the toxic products we found, and offered suggestions for safer alternatives.

U.S. PIRG Education Fund released our annual “Trouble in Toyland” report in November, identifying unsafe toys that skirted safety regulations and made it onto store shelves and internet marketplaces. Our national network and health professionals across the country held news events to alert parents and others of the dangers some toys pose to children.
Protecting consumers from data security threats

From warning of data breaches to preventing credit fraud to protecting consumers from identity theft, U.S. PIRG and our national network are here to help you keep your data safe and secure.

More than one year after announcing the biggest data breach in history, Equifax still hasn’t been held accountable or provided the information and tools consumers need to adequately protect themselves. The breach exposed 148 million consumers’ social security numbers and birthdates, and for some people, credit card numbers and driver’s license numbers, putting them at increased risk of identity theft. That’s why our network stepped in.

On Sept. 7—the anniversary of the public announcement of the Equifax data breach—U.S. PIRG Education Fund and our national network released a report detailing the government’s failure to hold the company accountable and offering tips for consumers to protect themselves. The report also concludes that both oversight and financial consequences are needed to prevent future large-scale breaches.

“We’ve put together tips for preventing, detecting and resolving different types of identity theft and fraud, all in one place,” said Mike Litt, member of U.S. PIRG Education Fund’s Consumer Watchdog team.
A major victory for data security
The best way to protect yourself against the Equifax breach and similar data security threats got a little easier in 2018. U.S. PIRG and our national network helped pass a bipartisan law requiring credit bureaus to offer free credit freezes—a vital protection against identity theft.

We recommend that everyone freeze their credit with all three major credit bureaus, Equifax, Experian and TransUnion. You should check your credit card statements regularly for fraudulent charges and set up an online Social Security account.

“It’s about time the credit bureaus stopped charging us for the right to control our own information. We didn’t give them permission to collect or sell our information in the first place,” said Mike Litt, member of our Consumer Watchdog team.

If you freeze your credit, the credit reporting bureaus can’t share your information with new lenders unless you first thaw the freeze—making it more difficult for criminals to open a fraudulent account in your name.
On August 17, a study from Environmental Working Group found glyphosate, the active ingredient in Monsanto’s Roundup, in a number of oat-based breakfast foods marketed to kids.

“Roundup has been linked to cancer by the World Health Organization and the state of California, but it, and generic versions of it, is still the most widely used herbicide in the U.S.,” said Kara Cook-Schultz, our national toxics program director. “If it’s showing up in kids’ breakfast foods, we should be absolutely sure of its long-term health effects.”

According to the study, 31 out of 45 tested products had glyphosate levels higher than what some scientists consider safe for kids. Using this and other growing evidence of Roundup’s widespread effects on public health, U.S. PIRG’s Toxics program spent 2018 gathering support for state-level legislation to ban the hazardous pesticide.

**Monsanto’s day in court**

In 2014, Dewayne Johnson, a father of two, was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin lymphoma, a deadly form of cancer. As a former county school pest manager, Johnson sprayed hundreds of gallons of Roundup—using it 20 to 30 times per year.

In August 2018, a jury supported Johnson’s claim that Roundup caused his cancer, finding Monsanto accountable for hiding the health risks of Roundup and awarding Johnson millions in damages.

“I would never have sprayed that product on school grounds or around people if I knew it would cause harm,” Johnson testified.

Twenty-six million pounds of Roundup are sprayed on school grounds, parks and gardens every year, and Johnson’s case was the first to go to trial of more than 800 people suing Monsanto, claiming Roundup caused their cancer. The evidence against Roundup has been piling up for years, and in 2018, our national network was able to help pass five bans on Roundup in cities and counties across the country.
From electronics to plastics, we throw away too much stuff. Some of this waste could be reused, recycled or repaired. Some of it should never have been produced in the first place. U.S. PIRG and our national network are tackling America’s trash problem.

Defending our right to repair
If a product you own breaks, you should be able to fix it or find someone who can. But products ranging from dishwashers to smartphones are purposefully made to be difficult, if not impossible, to repair.

“While companies profit, the public is forced to pay the price in financial costs and environmental damage,” said Nathan Proctor, director of our national campaign for the Right to Repair.

When Microsoft pressed criminal charges against e-waste recycler Eric Lundgren for copying restore disks that allow people to fix old computers—even though the software on those disks is available online for free—our national network launched an effort to urge Microsoft to work with recyclers, not penalize them.

Over the past year, our national network supported Right to Repair reforms in 18 states, because it shouldn’t be this difficult to keep our products away from the trash heap.

Moving beyond plastic
Every day, people throw away tons of plastic “stuff”—cups, plates, bags, containers, forks, knives, spoons and more. All of this waste not only clogs our landfills, trashes our parks, and litters our streets, but it also washes into our rivers and oceans, where it can harm wildlife.

Scientists are still documenting the scope of plastic pollution and investigating its effects. But for decades we’ve known that one of the worst forms of plastic pollution is polystyrene foam, the kind used in foam cups and take-out containers, which most of us call “Styrofoam.”

In 2018, U.S. PIRG and our national network built nationwide support to ban single-use foam takeout containers. Our coalition sent tens of thousands of comments asking state lawmakers to eliminate polystyrene cups and containers for good, but we’re just getting started.

Plastic foam bans have already passed in more than 200 cities and other communities, from Portland, Oregon, to Portland, Maine. Some companies are also getting with the program. Just last year, McDonald’s phased out foam cups and containers worldwide, in favor of 100 percent recycled materials.