



## *Safe Skies Maryland*

Dedicated to a Sustainable Future

### **The Maryland Senate Committee on Education, Health and Environmental Affairs**

### **SB 28 Solid Waste Management – Prohibition on Releasing a Balloon Into the Atmosphere**

#### **Position: Support**

Dear Chairman Pinsky and members of the committee:

Safe Skies Maryland is a statewide conservation initiative with an organizational membership representing a diverse and active body of citizens seeking to advance sustainability. We respectfully submit this letter in support of SB 28. Helium balloons are the only type of single-use item whose very use defines its intended goal: the intentional release of this item into the environment. When released, there can be no expectation of proper disposal as they travel many miles into the atmosphere and up to thousands of miles from the point of release, often ending up in our coastal and marine environments as deadly marine debris.

Balloons made from latex, Mylar, and foil contain elements of trees, plastic sheeting, and metals. It is important to note that while one of these types, latex, is marketed as a biodegradable product the natural latex has chemicals, plasticizers, and artificial dyes that change its composition to become what we know of as a commercial balloon that is no longer biodegradable. Latex balloons are the most common form of balloon found in the stomachs of deceased animals. Additionally, saltwater acts as a preservative, further inhibiting the decomposition of the chemical compounds in balloons and ensuring they remain deadly in the marine environment for extended periods of time. Because balloons float on the currents, where so many marine animals look for food, they are deadly to the entire marine ecosystem. This includes marine mammals, sea turtles, sea birds, and a host of other fish and invertebrates who actively *select to consume* this trash because they cannot distinguish a food item like jellyfish or squid from floating balloon fragments. Studies have shown that unlike hard plastics, these soft plastics can be deadly upon one incidence of ingestion as the material conforms to internal organs, cause gastrointestinal blockages, are not passed through the body like hard plastics, and can cause the animal to starve. In one recently published study, researchers called balloons, “the highest-risk debris item; 32 times more likely to result in death than ingesting hard plastic.” This current study supports similar prior findings in sea turtles. (Roman, et al. 2018. *A quantitative analysis linking seabird mortality and marine debris ingestion*. Scientific Reports.) In addition to ingestion, entanglement in the items used



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to tether balloons prior to release, like strings and ribbons, create more opportunity for these wayward items to become deadly pollutants as it is estimated that upwards of 100,000 marine animals annually become entangled and die as a result of being prevented from traveling and feeding normally posing an additional risk of starvation. Also, it is not uncommon for balloons to ensnare and impact power lines. And, the non-renewable element of Helium might be better conserved for its vital use in medical life-saving equipment such as MRIs and Spectrometers.

Communities everywhere are confronted with the realities of too much trash in the environment, in landfills, not enough of the trash produced being recycled fast enough, and the sad reality of huge floating islands of garbage in our oceans. Simply put, we are all living with too much trash. One of the deadliest and farthest traveling forms of this trash comes from the intentional release of balloons. What takes mere seconds to do creates an ongoing trail of damage, destruction, and death for which the environmental toll has been costly. The solution is both reasonable and responsible. It can no longer be argued that the intentional release of trash into the environment is acceptable given all that we know now and all that we hope to save of our natural world. For so many reasons, we support the intended outcome of this welcomed legislative effort.

We thank the committee for its consideration of this bill and respectfully ask for a favorable report.