Arundel Rivers FEDERATION

2822 Solomons Island Rd., Suite 202 ◊ Edgewater, MD 21037

410-224-3802 ◊ www.arundelrivers.org

Committee: House Environment and Transportation
Legislation: HB0209
Position: FAVORABLE
Date: February 11, 2020

Dear Chairman Barve and Members of the Committee:

The Arundel Rivers Federation ("the Federation") requests a favorable report for HB 209, the Plastics and Packaging Reduction Act ("the Act"), a bill carefully crafted to change reckless, wasteful consumption behaviors of our fellow citizens. The reduction of waste in the environment will not only improve the aesthetics of our roadways and communities, it will improve the recycling of other waste products, and protect the health of our terrestrial and marine environments. Accordingly, the Federation urges a favorable report.

Introduction

Many on this committee have heard of the Great Pacific Trash Gyre. The Gyre is a swirling mass of plastic waste, collecting in the Pacific Ocean, roughly the size of Mexico.[1] Such a massive amount of garbage is hard to fathom, and is so far away that one tends to push it out of one's mind. However, single-use plastics present serious problems here in Maryland too.

In the summer of 2017 Arundel Rivers Federation built a trash trap in a stream flowing into the South River, two miles from 6 Bladen Street where we sit today. To date, Arundel Rivers Federation staff have collected hundreds of plastic shopping bags from the trap, preventing their entry into the South River and the Chesapeake Bay. Although effective, the trash trap is not perfect, and bags occasionally float around in heavy storms, make it through the mesh of the trap, and in some cases, persist since before we built it. Many streams in suburban and urban watershed in the Chesapeake Bay region are similarly littered with plastic bags caught in tree roots and sticks, clogging streams, causing erosion and degrading habitat.

This is one stream flowing into one creek on one small river of the Chesapeake Bay. The Great Pacific Trash Gyre results from a global problem, and we should think globally. Walk any stream in your district and you are likely to see the same pollution of plastic bags there. House Bill 209 is an important way to act locally, and we urge your favorable report.

Litter

Plastic bags festooning street side trees have become so ubiquitous it is hard to even notice anymore. However, if one pays attention while traveling any road in our State or beyond, it will not be long before you can spot one. Once you go looking, you'll see them everywhere, wavering in the branches of trees and chain link fences like ghosts. This all-too-familiar disgrace can end with this bill. Once people start planning to bring a bag with them to the store for a few weeks or months, it will become second nature and we will wonder how we ever became so dependent on plastic bags in the first place.

Recycling and Plastic Bags

In the wake of China's recent refusal to process US recycling products, it has become increasingly clear to local and state governments that plastic bags pose a serious problem for recycling overall, as they clog up the machinery used to sort and process other recyclables.[2]

[1] National Geographic- https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2017/07/ocean-plastic-patch-south-pacific-spd/#close
[2] For Example, see Washington D.C.'s policy on plastic bags in recycling here: https://zerowaste.dc.gov/plasticbagremoval

In Chicago, the City's recycling center estimates the cost of freeing equipment from plastic bags at $9,500/month.[3] Rather than incur the cost, some jurisdictions, like Anne Arundel County, have simply banned plastic bags from their recycling containers, instead directing bins with plastic bags to the landfill, ensuring that all the other valuable recyclable content is lost.[4]
The behavior change this bill will bring will ensure that less, if any, plastic bags wind up clogging recycling equipment in the State, or causing otherwise valuable recyclables to be thrown away.

Aquatic Life and Human Health

Studies showing the harmful effects of microplastics like those generated by the breakdown of plastic bags on aquatic organisms are legion.

Anyone who has participated in a litter clean-up understands that plastic bags easily break down into tinier and tinier pieces. Eventually these pieces become particles of microplastics and are ingested by marine life. This ingestion has a number of deleterious effects on marine life from oysters and menhaden to pelicans and sea turtles, and the plastics also travel up the food chain from plankton to the fish we eat, like Atlantic Salmon.[5] Along the way, plastic particles absorb other toxic pollution, which also makes its way into fish, and then into humans.[6]

Conclusion

There are ample reasons to speed this bill to passage and we have articulated some above. But the big question this committee must answer is this: Do we think the citizens of our state are capable of positive change? I suspect that as legislators, you honorable Delegates long ago decided that the answer to this question is a resounding yes. Otherwise, why bother serving a public that is incapable of realizing the goals and requirements of the laws you pass?

Arundel Rivers shares the view that positive change is possible, and we suggest that as it pertains to plastic bags, it is necessary. Please vote favorably on HB 209, which will make a positive change in the lives of all Marylanders.

Respectfully submitted,

Jesse L. Iliff
South, West & Rhode RIVERKEEPER®
Arundel Rivers Federation, Inc.
2822 Solomons Island Rd., Suite 202
Edgewater, MD 21037
(410) 224-3802
jesse@arundelrivers.org

[3] https://www.chicagotribune.com/opinion/commentary/ct-plastic-bag-ban-recycling-0731-biz-20150730-story.html
[4] https://www.capitalgazette.com/opinion/columns/ac-ce-column-phipps-20190525-story.html
[5] Food Chain Transport of Nanoparticles Affects Behaviour and Fat Metabolism in Fish. Cedervall T, Hansson L-A, (2012). Available at http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0032254
[6] The Complex Interaction between Marine Debris and Toxic Chemicals in the Ocean. Engler, Richard E. Environmental Science & Technology 2012, vol 46. no.22, 12302-12315. Available at https://pubs.acs.org/doi/abs/10.1021/es3027105