

Written Comment – SB-28
Favorable Report

Jay Falstad – Queen Anne's Conservation Association

Dear Education, Health and Environment (EHE) Committee,

I urge you to support of SB-28. Balloon pollution is a major problem in Maryland and it affects a wide cross-section of constituencies, including farmers, watermen, sailors, water enthusiasts and others.

Balloon pollution is also a major threat to wildlife, marinelife, and farm animals. Through our research, we've found examples of balloon pollution impacting eagles, osprey, deer, horses, dolphins, turtles, horses, and numerous others who either ingest the balloon or they get tangled up in balloon ribbons. There is an example of an Assateague pony with a balloon ribbon stuck in its mouth.

Unlike conventional littering, balloon pollution is often deliberate. The impacts are substantial and long lasting. Mylar balloons (and their ribbons) are not biodegradable meaning balloons that are released into the environment now, will still be around hundreds of years from now.

By passing SB-28, Maryland would become the 8th State to ban balloon releases.

I urge you to support SB-28.

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'Balloon pollution': Releases are being banned across the country over debris

By [The Washington Post](#) Posted Sep 02, 2019



A balloon is tangled on the rocky coast after washing ashore in Biddeford Pool, Maine. Bills are pending in a growing number of states to ban the feel-good tradition of releasing helium-filled balloons at events, since they have the unintended consequence of spoiling the environment and threatening wildlife. (AP Photo/Robert F. Bukaty, 2019)AP

It was the deflated clump of balloons floating in [Unicorn Lake](#) that really did it.

When Jay Falstad found them near his home on Maryland's Eastern Shore,

he dutifully called the Dayton, Ohio, family that had released the balloons - four days earlier from more than 500 miles away - with an "if found" note.

"They just wanted to see how far they would go," said Falstad, an environmental activist. "The irony is almost too much."

The family's whimsical experiment unwittingly set in motion the country's latest ban on releasing helium-filled balloons, part of a national trend that views such "balloon pollution" as, at best, tantamount to littering.

Balloons have the potential to harm marine animals, who can ingest them or become entangled in their strings.

Bans on single-use plastics, such as straws and bags that end up in oceans, have garnered much more attention than the ills of wayward balloons, which don't crack the list of the top 10 most prevalent ocean debris worldwide, experts say. In March, the European Union included cotton swabs in its sweeping ban on single-use plastics, but it didn't bother including party balloons.

But research into balloon debris is, well, ballooning. Activists who had been toiling on the fringes for decades say their work appears to be at a tipping point.

"It's picking up speed," said Danielle Vosburgh, co-founder of [the Florida-based advocacy group Balloons Blow](#).

At least five states and more than a dozen cities nationwide have some form of a ban, including Virginia and Baltimore. More than a half-dozen other states have considered prohibitions in recent years, according to the National Conference on State Legislatures.

Last summer, Clemson University, under pressure from animal rights activists and environmentalists, decided to abandon its three-decade tradition of releasing thousands of orange helium-filled balloons while the

football team stormed into the stadium at each home game.

The latest ban was an easy sell to the all-Republican Board of County Commissioners in Queen Anne's County, Maryland, Falstad and others said, since once someone points out balloon debris it is hard not to notice it.

That's what happened to Falstad after the Unicorn Lake discovery: He suddenly saw ribbons in hedgerows, flashes of foil along the highway and biodegradable latex not quickly degrading along his rural county's miles of marshy shoreline.

"It's one of those problems hiding in plain sight," he said. "You don't really focus on it, but once you do, they're everywhere."

Commissioner Christopher Corchiarino sponsored the ban at Falstad's urging and said there was no real opposition, even among constituents who generally don't like expanding government regulation.

Once he started talking about the idea, he said, complaints about spooked horses and unwanted debris abounded. He said one constituent discovered a balloon from the Indianapolis 500 race, 600 miles away.

"It looks neat when they go up into the sky, but they come down," Corchiarino said. "What's the difference between that and driving by your neighbor's farm and throwing a McDonald's bag on it?"

The local ban, unanimously approved last week, carries a \$250 fine. It exempts "unintentional negligence."

"If your kid gets a balloon at a carnival and has slippery hands, don't worry," he said. "The sheriff's deputies aren't going to jump all over you."

Emma Tonge, communications director for the Marine Debris Program at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, said balloons are not among the world's top 10 ocean pollutants. But researchers in Australia

recently suggested that they might "be among the most harmful to sea birds, turtles and marine mammals," she said.

"We don't have a lot of information on how widespread it is," she said. "We don't have a full picture of the issue."

Newer surveys of U.S. coastlines suggest that the balloon problem is more prevalent in this country than worldwide. During a nine-year period ending in 2016, the International Coastal Cleanup program found an average of 31,000 balloons on U.S. beaches each year.

Researchers in Virginia, working with a NOAA grant, last year released a surprising study about the local problem. After four years monitoring five uninhabited beaches, the team discovered that balloon fragments were the most prevalent type of debris.

They collected more than 11,400 pieces between 2013 and 2017, along with plastic balloon valves, ribbons and the occasional laminated note addressed to someone in heaven.

"When we asked people who release balloons where they thought they went, the number one answer was, 'I never even thought about that,' " said Katie Register, who works for Clean Virginia Waterways at Longwood University and led the research project.

That research formed the basis of a new, federally backed advocacy campaign called "[Joyful Send-off](#)" that attempts to try to change balloon-release behavior in the Mid-Atlantic region.

Tonge said people concerned about balloon debris can take action on their own: "One of the easy things you can do is if you have a balloon, hold on to it. Or, you can just skip the balloon in the first place."

That's the kind of talk [the Balloon Council](#) worries about, the kind that could give balloons a lasting negative stigma.

"It's not the product that harms the environment, it's the misuse that does," said Lorna O'Hara, executive director of the Balloon Council, a trade group that advocates for "smart balloon practices."

She said the council weighs in on proposed bans across the country because "there's a slippery slope from balloon-release bans to balloon bans." She says that she hasn't lobbied in favor of balloon releases but that she's lobbied against language that called for jail time for repeat violators.

"That's excessive," she said. "Our stance is that balloons should be weighted [down] and enjoyed."

One chief target of the anti-balloon release crowd is the Indianapolis 500 race, which has opened the annual event by releasing thousands of helium-filled balloons since 1947. A spokesman declined to say exactly how many balloons are released, but he noted race planners use a rubber-derived latex that can biodegrade and do not use strings or ribbons.

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Queen Anne's County passes ban on releasing helium balloons

[E.B. Furgurson III](#)

Capital Gazette |

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Jay Falstad, Executive Director of the Queen Anne's Conservation Association, is backing a bill to make balloon releases illegal in Queen Anne's County and shows some balloons he has recently found on the Chester River. (Paul W. Gillespie / Capital Gazette)

Queen Anne's County Commissioners voted unanimously Tuesday to ban the release of non-biodegradable helium balloons, making it the first in the state to adopt such a ban.

"Intentionally releasing balloons into the atmosphere is nothing short of littering", said Commissioner Christopher M. Corchiarino, who authored the bill. "This ordinance will allow us to protect a cross-section of interests in the county while furthering the stewardship of our waterways and rural landscapes."

The bill was pushed by the Queen Anne's Conservation Association.

"Deflated mylar and latex balloons, and the ribbons attached to them, harm the environment by maiming and killing wildlife, sea creatures, and farm animals," QACA executive director Jay Falstad said.

He said animals, and in particular turtles and birds, mistake the balloons for food. They also can become entangled in balloon strings and die.

Balloon releases have become part of various celebrations like graduations, and Falstad said the effect of the balloons once they plummet and deflate is beginning to be recognized as a problem.

"Non-biodegradable balloons in trees or farm-fields, in the Chesapeake Bay or any other waterway, including the Atlantic Ocean, are a growing, if still not widely realized, environmental threat," Falstad said.

The ordinance, which goes into effect in 45 days, specifies fines of up to \$250 for deliberate violations. The bill was introduced by Corchiarino July 9, and a hearing was held August 13.

Witnesses testifying at the hearing said they have found balloons from the Midwest in Queen Anne's farm fields.

Kristin Weed of Kent Island Beach Cleanups said balloons are always found among the trash collected during her organization's beach cleanups.

Chester River Riverkeeper Tim Trumbauer of Shore Rivers testified balloons are one of the most common forms of trash he sees along the Chester River.

"We're always finding balloons on our roadside clean ups," said Bente Cooney of Plastic Free QAC. "Hopefully other jurisdictions in Maryland and elsewhere will see what we're doing and model similar legislation to tackle this problem."

Falstad said he heard from some members of the Maryland General Assembly who expressed interest in similar legislation next session. Anne Arundel County does not have a law prohibiting balloon releases.

"This ordinance is a major accomplishment, and I couldn't be more proud that Queen Anne's County is taking the lead on this important environmental issue," Falstad said. "In this day and age when there is so much bad news for the environment it is nice to see a little ray of sunshine.

Anne Arundel County officials have heard from some advocacy groups about the balloon issue, said Chris Trumbauer, county senior adviser for policy and communications.

"The county executive is more interested in comprehensive plastics legislation," Trumbauer said. "But we don't have anything in the hopper as our forest conservation bill will require so much focus."

In Annapolis an effort is afoot, said Alderman Rob Savidge, D-Ward 7.

"There is interest, and it is on my list. But first we are trying a public education campaign," Savidge said.

Balloons could be included in a more comprehensive bill on single use plastics. Savidge's first focus though is a bill to ban plastic bags. He has requested a draft of the bill and hopes to introduce it next month.

E.B. "Pat" Furgurson III is an award-winning reporter for The Capital currently covering the environment. He can be reached at 410-280-5944.

Latest Environment













A photograph of a tree with several colorful fabric ornaments hanging from its branches. The ornaments include a red one, a black one, and a yellow one. The tree has many thin, bare branches and a few small red flowers. The background is a clear blue sky.

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