



**THE HUMANE SOCIETY
OF THE UNITED STATES**

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Senate Committee on Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs

SB 716: Prohibition on Releasing a Balloon into the Atmosphere

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The Humane Society of the United States, representing our members and supporters across Maryland, strongly supports SB 716. This legislation is aimed at ending environmentally unsound balloon releases in Maryland.

We do have two technical amendments that we encourage the committee to consider, but our support is not conditional on these changes.

We recommend that the current definition of balloon be replaced with language that makes it clear what a balloon is: ***Balloon means an inflatable object: (A) manufactured from plastic, latex, rubber, or mylar; and (B) inflated with a gas that is lighter than air, such as helium.*** The current language is unclear and includes balloons that are unfilled.

We also recommend that the definition of an 'instance' of a balloon release be specified, such as: ***Each release of 50 or fewer balloons at one time is a separate civil violation.*** That way an individual or organization releasing 500 balloons would receive a stronger penalty than someone releasing only 1. This language was used in the recently passed Montgomery County law, and including it here would create consistency with that recent reform.

While releasing a helium balloon into the atmosphere during a celebratory event or a solemn memorial may be visually pleasing, it is extremely detrimental to the environment and the pain and suffering experienced by animals as a result of these releases is staggering. Discarding a balloon into the atmosphere is simply littering. Once released, balloons can travel for hundreds of miles before they burst or deflate and become litter. Seabirds, sea turtles, seals and other marine mammals are injured or killed after ingesting or becoming entangled in balloons and their strings. Animals on land such as horses, cows, and other farm animals are also at risk.

Balloons are commonly made of latex or mylar materials and present a danger to animals who perceive them as food, or they may get caught in the ribbons attached to them, hindering their ability to move around and feed. For example, when balloons burst, they resemble jellyfish, the natural prey of sea turtles, and subsequently block their digestive tract when ingested. Seabirds are at particular risk, as a [recent study](#) found that balloons are the leading marine debris risk of mortality for seabirds.

Both the [U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service](#) and the [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration](#) warn against the practice. Even so-called 'biodegradable' balloons take years to break down in the environment. Therefore, wildlife and marine animals will continue to ingest them. A study found more than [18,000 balloons](#), strings, and other pieces were picked up along the Great Lakes shorelines in Detroit from 2016 to 2018.

Maryland's beaches, mountains, and fields are resources worthy of the greatest standards of protection. There are eco-friendly alternatives to balloon releases that are appropriate for celebratory or solemn events including lighting a candle, creating a charity fundraiser, planting a tree, or organizing a service day. As we become aware of the harmful implications of balloon releases, we need to change our behavior accordingly and ensure we are compassionate not only towards humans, but toward all living beings.

It is important to note that there is a lot of momentum on this issue at the county level in Maryland. Queen Anne's, Wicomico, Frederick, and most recently Montgomery County have already enacted bans. Maryland needs a statewide prohibition to be a leader on this issue, and to reinforce the importance of ending this harmful practice.

Thank you for your consideration of this important legislation. We respectfully urge a favorable report on SB 716, with the two technical amendments noted above.

For more information contact Jennifer Bevan-Dangel, Maryland State Director, at JBevanDangel@HumaneSociety.org or 202-963-8446.