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VPIRG, Environmental Advocate
Testimony to the Fish and Wildlife Committee re: H.4
1/14/15

Good morning. My name is Taylor Johnson and I'm an Environmental Advocate with VPIRG, the statewide environmental group. I first want to thank the Committee for devoting time to this important issue and especially Chairman Deen and Representatives Komline and Krowinski for their leadership.

Founded in 1972, VPIRG is the largest non-profit consumer and environmental advocacy organization in Vermont, with over 30,000 members and supporters. We have looked closely at the subject of this legislation and aside from the written testimony I will submit to the Committee, we would be happy to be counted as a resource for information throughout this process.

We believe that plastic microbeads found in some soaps, cleansers and other personal care products present a serious threat to our waterways and aquatic life, and should be eliminated. Therefore, VPIRG fully supports the bill language of H.4 as introduced, and we have collected over 1,000 signatures from Vermonters who feel the same way.

Microbeads are microscopic plastic orbs used as exfoliates in home hygiene and beauty products. These tiny particles, barely visible to the naked eye, are discharged into our waterways via the bathroom drain when we wash off products—such as facial scrubs, soaps, and toothpastes—that contain microbeads. These beads are often too small to be captured by wastewater management facilities, and updating these facilities to filter out microbeads would be extremely time consuming and costly.¹

Once in our waters, microbeads persist for decades and are impossible to remove, acting as sponges for toxic chemical pollutants. Mistaken for food by aquatic organisms, microbeads serve as a pathway for pollutants to enter the food chain and contaminate the fish and wildlife we eat. In fact, in 2011 the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration stated that plastic debris accumulates pollutants such as PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) up to 100,000 to 1,000,000 times the levels found in seawater.²

The good news is that there appear to be safe, effective and natural alternatives to plastic microbeads. These alternatives may be sourced from materials such as ground almonds, oatmeal, and pumice. They are economically viable and don't harm the environment.

Vermont Public Interest Research Group

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So, we can easily imagine a future without plastic microbeads. In fact, even major producers of products containing microbeads have pledged to phase them out. For instance, Unilever released this statement in 2013:

“Unilever has decided to phase out plastic scrub beads from personal care products. This is because we believe we can provide consumers with products that deliver a similar exfoliating performance without the need to use plastics. We expect to complete this phase globally by 2015...”³

We know that the microbead problem is widespread and pervasive. An ongoing investigation by the Attorney General of New York has identified over 100 cosmetics and personal care products containing microbeads in the United States, including those considered over-the-counter drugs. Furthermore, a 2012 study of the Great Lakes found densities as high as 466,000 pieces of plastic per square kilometer in Lake Erie.⁴

I urge the Committee to pay close attention to the testimony of Vermont scientists who have evidence that microbeads are already presenting a real problem for Lake Champlain. Others will demonstrate that some Vermont businesses are already thriving without the usage of these plastic pollutants in their personal care products.

In closing, it is VPIRG’s position that banning microbeads in the state we will bolster Vermont’s long-standing efforts to protect and enhance the quality of our water resources and the organisms that inhabit them.

Thank you very much and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

¹L.S. Fendall, M.A. Sewell, ‘Contributing to marine pollution by washing your face: microplastics in facial cleansers’, in: *Marine Pollution Bulletin*, 58 (8) (2009), pp. 1225-1228.

² Schneiderman, Eric T. *Unseen Threat: How Microbeads Threaten New York Waters, Wildlife, Health and Environment*. Rep. N.p.: New York State Attorney General, n.d. Print.

³ Unilever. (2013). Statement on Sustainable Living: Micro-Plastic. Retrieved January 3, 2014, from:

www.unilever.com/sustainable-living/Respondingtoholderconcerns/microplastics/

⁴ Schneiderman, Eric T. *Unseen Threat: How Microbeads Threaten New York Waters, Wildlife, Health and Environment*. Rep. N.p.: New York State Attorney General, n.d. Print.