



Testimony on S.113 –Prohibition of plastic carryout bags, expanded polystyrene, and single-use plastic straws
Senate Natural Resources
Submitted by Erin Sigrist, VRGA President
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VRGA represents over 750 members across the state. Our membership is inclusive of a variety of business types and models, collaborative and extremely diverse. Members include general retail, grocery stores, convenience stores, distributors, food producers, and business services members. VRGA creates a unified voice for its engaged membership to influence legislation through lawmaker and public education. Our benefits are fundamental to our members' economic success and to their positive community impact.

Plastic bags and other single-use disposable items are used by almost every Vermont resident and business. We must consider the impact of new policies not only on the environment, but also the human condition as it is and consider education and a phased approach to eliminating these plastics.

While VRGA has not taken a position on straws, I would like to address the other two pieces to S.113.

Single-Use Carryout bags

S.113 only acknowledges single-use plastic bags. A straight ban of only one of two options often presented at a grocery store will result in consumers taking the alternative that is still available for free. While consumption of single-use plastic will decrease, consumption of free paper will increase.

Paper bags are heavier than plastic bags, require more space for storage, and require up to seven times the number of truck trips in order to transport the same amount of plastic bags.

Allowing disposable paper bags but not single-use plastic bags will cost retailers up to six times the cost of plastic bags.

To address the environmental, natural resources, and financial effects of single-use bags, I ask the committee to consider a phasing in a program to discourage the use of both single-use plastic and single-use paper bags before banning all single-use carryout bags. This is why VRGA is supporting H.506 (tweaks) – a bill that would impose a 5-cent fee on plastic and paper single-use carryout bags, and one year later banning single-use plastic carryout bags while continuing the 5-cent fee on paper. The fee will stay with the retailer to offset the costs of the bag. We must allow time to educate consumers about this change, deter them from the expectation of a free disposable paper bag, and allow retailers to eliminate their inventory prior to an all-out ban.

By no means do we believe this will make a significant impact in the amount of plastics in the environment, but we have no interest in, and do not support, a patchwork of bans or fees around the state.

Expanded Polystyrene

As the landscape continues to rapidly change (online shopping increases, increased consumer demand for more environmentally friendly carry-out products and packaging) VRGA is encouraging the committee to establish a comprehensive plastic pollution management taskforce with balanced representation to study ways to efficiently and cost-effectively reduce plastic waste and expanded polystyrene.

The data analytics company Nielsen reports that online shopping rates are growing at a rate of more than 30% year over year, increasing the amount of packaging coming into the state – many packages that contain packing peanuts (expanded polystyrene) and other plastics.

Distributors in Vermont are part of a complex network of local, regional, national, and international distribution. Shipping products from one location to another, whether locally or internationally results in the need for proper packaging to reduce damage of goods. Because expanded polystyrene is so light and the least expensive option, many shipping containers contain some form of this product.

For example:

- when a store gets a shipment of fruit (pears) you will quite often see a form of cushioning to keep them from bruising
- certain food items (ramen noodles) still packaged in polystyrene – will those be banned?
- when a grocery store packs fruits or vegetables, *butchers meat in-house they become the manufacturer. Will they be banned from using this product?*

For over 50 years the product has been studied and the FDA, American Cancer Society, Toxicology Institute and others have concluded expanded polystyrene is safe.

I would encourage the committee to hear from schools, hospitals, and programs such as Meals on Wheels to determine if they will be impacted.

Again, the landscape continues to rapidly change. Due to increased consumer demand manufacturers are working to create more environmentally friendly carryout products.

Taskforces been established in Rhode Island, New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut. (New Jersey and Connecticut were legislative mandates, while Rhode Island and New York were by executive order.)

VRGA urges the committee to consider establishing a comprehensive plastic pollution management taskforce with balanced representation to study ways to efficiently and cost-effectively reduce plastic waste and expanded polystyrene rather than an all-out ban.