



PIRG Zero Waste Advocate Holly Thompson speaks at an event in Washington, D.C., calling on Whole Foods to get rid of unnecessary single-use plastic packaging.  
Credit: Yazan Aboushi

## BEYOND PLASTIC

# 10 steps Whole Foods can take to cut out single-use plastic

Authored by Matt Casale, who directs PIRG's zero waste campaigns.

Whole Foods has built its brand on a commitment to sustainability and environmentally responsible retail. Its customers shop at its stores because they share that commitment, and they expect the products on the shelves to reflect those values.

One value those customers increasingly share is a desire to reduce the amount of plastic in their lives. But the reality is that Whole Foods often makes it harder, rather than easier, for them to do that.

A survey by our research partners at U.S. PIRG Education Fund reviewed the packaging options of Whole Foods' "365" in-house brand products in 27 stores across the country to assess consumers' options for avoiding plastic. We found that customers have limited opportuni-

ties to purchase 365 brand items without plastic packaging. Fewer than 50% of the products surveyed were available in plastic-free packaging in the majority of Whole Foods stores.

These results indicate not only that Whole Foods is missing out on a major opportunity to reduce the amount of plastic waste piling up in our communities and environment right now, but also that it could be leading the whole industry further away from single-use plastic if it were to take action. Here are the 10 most effective steps Whole Foods can take:

### 1) Eliminate plastic produce packaging

Trader Joe's recently eliminated plastic packaging around apples, potatoes and tomatoes and switched deli plastic wrapping for paper. Whole Foods can, and should, do the same.



CALPIRG and The Public Interest Network are celebrating 50 years of action for a change.

SUMMER 2023

## WHOLE FOODS HAS A PLASTIC PROBLEM CONT.



*In large part because of its excessive use of single-use plastic packaging, Whole Foods scored an "F" two years in a row on a survey of different companies' efforts to reduce plastic waste.*

### 2) Introduce reusable packaging in all Whole Foods stores

One key piece of the plastic-reduction puzzle is reusable packaging. Grocery stores such as Kroger now partner with Loop to provide reusable packaging for a variety of products. The system works by charging a 100%-refundable deposit for reusable packaging, allowing consumers to shop, eat and return the containers to the store.

### 3) Ensure all remaining packaging is recyclable or compostable—and labeled truthfully

The company should eliminate the "chasing arrows" symbols from products that cannot be recycled. California recently became the first state to require truthful recyclability labeling to help clear up confusion for consumers.

### 4) Disclose plastic packaging use

Currently, Whole Foods advertises reducing its plastic packaging by 1 million pounds annually. But without disclosing the total amount or types of plastic packaging used each year, there is no way to tell how impactful this reduction truly is.

### 5) Phase out single-use packaging with dangerous chemicals (BPA, phthalates and PFAS)

To live up to its green reputation, Whole Foods should get rid of all packaging containing these dangerous chemical compounds, as other companies have already started doing.

### 6) Accept reusable containers and cups for fresh food and coffee bars

It's a commonsense solution: allowing customers to bring their own reusable containers at the deli counter, to-go counter, fish and seafood counter, bakery, hot-food bar, and coffee and

smoothie bars. Other stores, including Metro in Canada, have already taken this step.

### 7) Offer on-site compost

Most Whole Foods stores offer fresh food bars with compostable foodware, but many do not have on-site compost for the food waste they produce and that consumers create when they use their on-site dining facilities. Changing that would help reduce the millions of tons of compostable food and packaging America wastes every year.

### 8) Offer 100% recycled paper produce and bulk bags

Whole Foods was the first national retailer to offer Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certified paper bags at checkout counters. For each bag, consumers are charged a 5-cent fee, incentivizing reusable bags instead of paper. This same principle should be applied to bagging produce and bulk items.

### 9) Promote reusable packaging alternatives throughout the store

When perusing the aisles of most Whole Foods stores, you'll come across plastic bags in the produce section and paper bags at checkout stations. Whole Foods should always sell reusable bags at these locations.

### 10) Invest in community-based waste reduction and recycling infrastructure

Whole Foods has several philanthropic programs, including Sourced for Good, the Whole Planet Foundation and the Whole Kids Foundation, among others. These programs provide vital support and funding, but could be expanded to invest in waste reduction and recycling infrastructure initiatives.

#### OUR MISSION

When consumers are cheated or the voices of ordinary citizens are drowned out by special interest lobbyists, PIRG speaks up and takes action. We uncover threats to public health and well-being and fight to end them, using the time-tested tools of investigative research, media exposes, grassroots organizing, advocacy and litigation. PIRG's mission is to deliver persistent, results oriented public interest activism that protects consumers, encourages a fair, sustainable economy and fosters responsive democratic government.

## NEWS BRIEFS

### HEALTHY AIR

#### Are gas stoves hazardous for your health? Yes.

No, the federal government is not planning to ban gas stoves. But there is a growing amount of attention being paid to the ways these appliances put our health at risk.

The recent wave of media attention comes on the heels of a study documenting a link be-



## NEWS BRIEFS

tween gas stoves and respiratory problems. Researchers found that more than 1 in 8 cases of childhood asthma nationwide can be attributed to gas stove use, and that gas stoves pose a similar asthma risk to children as secondhand smoke exposure. That's why Richard Trumka Jr., one of the members of the federal Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC), said: "This is a hidden hazard."

"The CPSC is doing its job, reviewing the research and data to determine the risk. And that's a good thing," said PIRG Environment Campaigns Director Matt Casale. "But there's still a lot of work to be done to make sure consumers have all the facts."

### DON'T SELL MY DATA

#### Electronic toys can collect kids' data. Here's what you need to know.

You're probably aware that, in our increasingly digital world, various bits of information about ourselves (our "data") are widely available on the internet and collected by online companies. But did you know that children are often put in the same position by digital and internet-connected toys?

R.J. Cross, director of PIRG's Don't Sell My Data campaign, is helping parents get up to speed on some of the potential dangers of these "smart" toys, such as the risk that a child's information could become exposed online. R.J. and our consumer team have focused on providing concrete tips on whether and how to buy a smart toy, and for ensuring safe play if you do decide to bring one home.

"Having any data collected on a child that isn't strictly necessary is unsafe—especially when one of the primary ways this data can be used is to be sold to advertisers," R.J. told CBS Mornings, which covered U.S. PIRG Education Fund's "Smart Decisions about Smart Toys" report.

### ZERO WASTE FOR CALIFORNIA

#### On Valentine's Day, we called on Amazon to 'break up with plastic'

Online retailers such as Amazon create an enormous amount of plastic waste with single-use packaging that we just don't need. Most of that plastic packaging is not recycled, but rather is



landfilled, burned in incinerators, or breaks into small pieces in the environment.

To tackle this growing problem, we're calling on Amazon to eliminate single-use plastic packaging in its shipments. On Feb. 13, we delivered 97,000 petition signatures from our members and other supporters.

"We know what we're asking for is possible, because Amazon has already committed to stop using single-use plastic in shipments within Germany and India, and recyclable and biodegradable packaging alternatives are available now," said CALPIRG State Director Jenn Engstrom.

Amazon has yet to act, so we'll keep up the momentum and continue showing support from the public.

*PIRG's R.J. Cross gets the word out on Fox13 News Seattle about the ways internet-connected toys can put kids' personal information at risk.*

#### GO PAPERLESS!

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Support our work in the public interest by including a gift to CALPIRG or CALPIRG Education Fund in your will, trust or retirement accounts.

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CITIZEN AGENDA • SUMMER 2023

50  
YEARS

CALPIRG and our national network are celebrating 50 years of action for a change. The Public Interest Network operates and supports organizations committed to a shared vision of a better world and a strategic approach to social change.

## RIGHT TO REPAIR

# How to know which consumer electronics are repairable

Tired of the ways consumer tech companies incentivize buying a new phone, laptop, tablet or other device every year or two, rather than being able to keep what you already own in use for longer?

The second edition of U.S. PIRG Education Fund's "Failing the Fix" scorecard grades popular manufacturers on how easy (or hard) they make it for their customers to fix their electronics when something breaks.

Some of the key results: Motorola continues to lead with a B+, followed by Samsung with a C, Google with a D+, and Apple with a D, up from last year's F.

"In spite of the rapidly growing problem of electronic waste, a number of these companies are unfairly restricting access to the tools and information



CALPIRG Consumer Advocate Sander Kushen releases the Failing the Fix scorecard.

needed to repair their devices, or actively lobbying against Right to Repair legislation (or both)," said PIRG Right to Repair Campaign Senior Director Nathan Proctor.

"Consumers—and the planet—deserve better."

## FEATURED STAFF



**Jenn Engstrom:** Jenn directs CALPIRG's advocacy efforts and is a leading voice in Sacramento and across the state on protecting public health, standing up for consumers and defending our democracy. Previously, as the deputy national director for the Student PIRGs, she helped run our national effort to mobilize hundreds of thousands of students to vote.

Kimball Nelson

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