



**CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC**

**LIVE**

**CORONAVIRUS CASES TOP 4.1 MILLION IN THE UNITED STATES**

**MSNBC**  
9:03 PM ET

# CALPIRG



## 2020 PROGRAM REPORT

# Finding common ground and making real progress

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*Dear CALPIRG member,*

*Thank you for opening this report on our action, progress and results in 2020—a year that many Americans wish they could forget.*

*As the nation grappled with COVID-19, many of our national network's advocates and organizers turned their focus to strategies designed to save as many lives as possible.*

*Our staff and many of our supporters joined public health and medical groups in urging federal leaders to centralize the medical supply chain to ensure critical supplies reached areas most in need. As cases surged in the summer and fall, we joined health care workers in calling on states and federal leaders to put public health first by scaling back reopening until the virus could be suppressed. And, with the announcement of promising vaccine trial results as the year came to a close, we organized online forums with expert panelists to identify strategies for vaccinating as many people as possible as quickly as possible.*

*Meanwhile, PIRG's consumer watchdogs continued to monitor the marketplace and give consumers resources to protect themselves. After a report by U.S. PIRG Education Fund revealed rampant price surges for hand sanitizer and masks on Amazon in March 2020, for example, we started a call for the world's largest online marketplace to adopt controls to protect Americans from price surges for essential items.*

*As COVID-19 cases climbed in the spring of 2020, it became vitally important for hospitals to keep ventilators in service as much as possible. Our Right to Repair campaign mobilized quickly to call on manufacturers to lower barriers to ventilator repair, and, in April, several major manufacturers did exactly that.*

*All of these efforts—in addition to our ongoing work to cut down on plastic waste, reduce our exposure to toxic chemicals, and more—were made possible by your support. Our country will always face challenges. As the American people decide how to meet them, it's our job to offer a voice for the public interest. We're grateful to you and so many others for granting us this privilege.*

*Thank you.*

*Emily Rusch*



*Emily Rusch*  
Executive Director



**FLASHBACK**—CALPIRG Students at UC Berkeley launch the Plastic-Free Seas campaign in November 2019.



CALPIRG launched a campaign urging Whole Foods to eliminate unnecessary plastic packaging from its stores in November 2020.

# Beyond Plastic

CALPIRG launched a campaign urging Whole Foods to eliminate unnecessary single-use plastic packaging from its stores. Meanwhile, our state showed that college campuses can help lead the way on reducing waste.

## **CALPIRG urges Whole Foods to do its part to cut plastic pollution**

**NOV. 30, 2020:** Whole Foods isn't living up to its planet-before-profit reputation—but lightening its plastic footprint could change that and help address our plastic waste problem.

In November 2020, CALPIRG launched a campaign calling for a commitment from Whole Foods to phase out single-use plastic packaging at its stores. Earlier in the year, environmental group As You Sow gave the grocery chain an “F” for its policies on plastic packaging, material that contributes to the massive amounts of plastic waste overrunning our landfills, littering our communities and polluting our planet.

“As a company with a reputation for selling food that is good for people and the planet, Whole Foods can make a big dent in reducing plastic pollution,” said Alex Truelove, Zero Waste campaign director with our national network.

“Whole Foods Market once led the industry as the first U.S. grocer to eliminate plastic grocery bags at checkout in 2008. It’s time they lead again.”

## **CALPIRG Students secure UC commitment to move beyond plastic**

**AUG. 31, 2020:** What would happen if one of the largest university systems in America eliminated single-use plastics from its campuses? We’ll soon find out, thanks to a new policy at the University of California (UC).

On Aug. 24, the UC Office of the President and our partners at CALPIRG Students jointly announced that, following a student-run campaign, UC campuses will start phasing out single-use plastics—paving the way for campuses free of non-essential plastics by 2030. The move will help curb the plastic pollution contaminating our waterways, overrunning our landfills and polluting our communities.

“Students are more conscious than ever of the consumption of plastic and its negative impact on our environment and public health,” said UC Berkeley graduate Nicole Haynes, statewide Plastic-Free Seas coordinator with CALPIRG Students. “We’re thrilled that our institution, which has so much purchasing power in California, is taking major steps to eliminate single-use plastics.”

CALPIRG and CALPIRG Students then called on the state Legislature to follow UC’s lead by passing the Plastic Pollution Reduction Act. ■



*Matt Wellington, public health campaigns director with our national network (left), urged federal decision-makers in July 2020 to slow the spread of the coronavirus by temporarily closing non-essential businesses and to contain the virus by ramping up testing infrastructure. Matt's appearance sparked an outpouring of support from health care professionals, who joined the call for decision-makers to put public health first.*

# Responding to COVID-19

The coronavirus pandemic poses the greatest threat to Americans' health and safety in a century. But through the course of 2020, the United States lacked a coordinated federal response to the crisis.

As COVID-19 cases started to climb, our national network assembled a team of advocates and policy experts to research and elevate strategies for protecting public health and turning the tide on the pandemic. Working with health care professionals, and with the support of people like you, we advocated for measures to suppress the virus, increase testing, keep health care workers safe, protect consumers and more. Here's some of the work that you helped make possible in this unprecedented year.

## **A call to shut down, start over, do it right**

**AUG. 14, 2020:** Health professionals from California and across the country called on Gov. Gavin Newsom in late July to implement stay-at-home restrictions and increase testing capacity and production of personal protective equipment in response to national surges in COVID-19 cases.

Nearly 1,400 health care professionals signed our national network's open letter to governors and President Trump emphasizing that in order to contain new outbreaks of COVID-19, we needed to shut down, start over and do it right. In July, California was experiencing "uncontrolled spread" of the virus.

"Our decision-makers need to hit the reset button," said CALPIRG Executive Director Emily Rusch. "Continuing on our current path will result in widespread suffering. And for what? Health experts have laid out criteria for how to reopen safely. It's time to listen to them."

Our national network delivered similar letters to local, state and federal leaders, echoing the message that “reopening our economy” is not worth risking the loss of thousands of American lives to COVID-19.

### **PIRG to federal lawmakers: Ramp up COVID testing, PPE production**

**NOV. 24, 2020:** As COVID-19 cases and deaths reached new highs in November 2020, Americans desperately needed stronger action to suppress the coronavirus and protect the health care workers who protect all of us.

Our national network urged federal lawmakers to provide at least \$75 billion to help states ramp up their testing efforts and to boost production of personal protective equipment (PPE) by requiring the Trump administration to fully utilize the Defense Production Act.

Scaled-up testing allows states to catch isolated cases before they become full-scale outbreaks. Meanwhile, increased PPE production helps ensure that frontline workers have the supplies they need to protect themselves and their patients from the virus.

“Americans have sacrificed so much since March, but our leaders haven’t stepped up to meet that sacrifice,” said Matt Wellington. “Our best defenses against COVID-19 are widespread

testing and sufficient PPE, yet we still have nowhere near enough of either.”

### **Panel experts discussed COVID-19 vaccination with U.S. PIRG’s Matt Wellington**

**NOV. 16, 2020:** In November 2020, pharmaceutical companies Moderna and Pfizer announced promising results for their COVID-19 vaccines, prompting questions about what the public should expect and when.

To answer these and other questions, our national network’s public health campaigns director, Matt Wellington, was joined by public health experts Drs. Syra Madad, Saad B. Omer, Krutika Kuppalli and Trudy Larson for the first in an ongoing series of panel discussions.

The experts discussed trial results for the emerging vaccines, obstacles to distributing the vaccines across the country, and what to expect once vaccines are rolled out to the public.

“Our biggest vulnerability is not the vaccine anymore. Increasingly, it’s vaccination,” said Dr. Omer, director of the Yale Institute for Global Health. “We should demand the same level of rigor in vaccine acceptance science as we demand in terms of vaccine development science.”

Video of the full panel discussions can be viewed on our national partner U.S. PIRG’s Facebook page. ■



*In the fall of 2020, our national network called on Congress to send states resources needed to ramp up their COVID-19 testing efforts.*



*To discuss COVID-19 vaccination, Matt Wellington was joined by Dr. Syra Madad, infectious disease epidemiologist and fellow at Harvard’s Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs.*



Former CALPIRG Public Health Advocate Laura Deehan spoke at a January 2020 press conference with Assemblymembers Al Muratsuchi and Buffy Wicks in support of the Toxic-Free Cosmetics Act.

# Standing up for a future that's toxic-free

We shouldn't have to worry about coming into contact with toxic chemicals in our daily lives. In 2020, California consumers saw wins for healthier consumer products and lead-free school drinking water. But there's still more work ahead to make sure our future is toxic-free.

## Bill to prohibit toxic chemicals in cosmetic products becomes law

**OCT. 12, 2020:** California has stepped up to make sure our cosmetics don't put our health at risk.

On Sept. 30, Gov. Gavin Newsom signed the CALPIRG-sponsored Toxic-Free Cosmetics Act—the nation's first state-level ban of 24 toxic ingredients, including mercury and formaldehyde, from beauty and personal care products. Already prohibited from cosmetics sold in the European Union and some other countries, these chemicals are linked to severe health issues such as cancer, birth defects, organ system damage and endocrine disruption.

"In the more than 80 years since Congress last took action to regulate cosmetics, products have appeared containing highly toxic chemicals that aren't covered by our increasingly outdated laws," said CALPIRG Public Health Associate Claudia Deeg.

"Nothing we use on our bodies every day should be able to harm us for the rest of our lives. We applaud this crucial action to protect public health, and we are grateful to Assemblymembers Al Muratsuchi, Buffy Wicks and Bill Quirk for introducing the legislation."

## San Diego has a new plan to get the lead out of school drinking water

**MARCH 2, 2020:** In 2017, San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD) adopted the most ambitious plan in the nation to get the lead out of its drinking water. Now, it's doubling down on that plan.

On Feb. 26, SDUSD's board of education voted to fully adopt a standard to allow no more than 1 part per billion (ppb) of lead in the drinking water in its schools—the standard recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics.

SDUSD's decision comes after the completion of its pilot remediation program at Clay Elementary School, which found success in tearing out old and contaminated fixtures and replacing them with new lead-free fountains and water filling stations.

"As we can see from the leadership displayed at Clay Elementary, it is possible to get the lead out and protect children from this toxic exposure," said Laura Deehan, then-public health advocate for our research partner CALPIRG Education Fund.

CALPIRG Education Fund has continued to encourage other California school districts to join SDUSD in adopting a 1 ppb lead remediation standard.

## In a win for consumer safety, Johnson & Johnson stops sale of talc-based baby powder

**MAY 19, 2020:** A product too often contaminated with toxic asbestos shouldn't be on store shelves.

That's why it was a major win for consumers when Johnson & Johnson announced May 19 that it would stop selling talc-based baby powder in the U.S. and Canada.

Because the minerals are often found near each other in nature, talc can be contaminated with asbestos, a known carcinogen, when mined. As of March 2020, there were more than 19,000 lawsuits filed against Johnson & Johnson by plaintiffs claiming that the company's baby powder caused their cancer.

"Johnson & Johnson's decision to get talc out of its baby powders sold in the U.S. and Canada is important," said Danielle Melgar, toxics advocate with our national research partner U.S. PIRG Education Fund.

"But there's more to do to protect ourselves from toxic chemicals in the products we use every day."

U.S. PIRG Education Fund called on Johnson & Johnson to eliminate talc in its baby powder worldwide and on the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to ban talc in consumer products. ■



Laura Deehan calls for San Diego Unified School District to adopt a lead remediation standard of 1 ppb at a February 2020 press conference in San Diego.



As of March 2020, Johnson & Johnson faced more than 19,000 lawsuits filed by plaintiffs claiming the company's baby powder caused their cancer.



*Grace Brombach, Consumer Watchdog associate with our national network, joined WSYX to advocate on behalf of consumers facing online price gouging on critical supplies in April 2020. Our national research partners at U.S. PIRG Education Fund first exposed massive price surges for hand sanitizer and masks on Amazon in March 2020.*

# PIRG Consumer Watchdog on the alert

For more than 40 years, PIRG's consumer watchdogs have identified threats in the marketplace and advocated for stronger consumer protections. In 2020, as Americans faced new dangers brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, our network and our research partners at U.S. PIRG Education Fund responded. And, thanks to your support, we helped push a landmark law to protect Americans from surprise medical billing over the finish line.

## **2020 was a year of price surges on the world's largest online marketplace**

**JAN. 7, 2021:** In the midst of the COVID-19 crisis, Amazon shoppers have grappled with price spikes for items they need. Analysis by our national research partners at U.S. PIRG Education Fund found that the problem persisted over the course of 2020. The research revealed that hundreds of listings for essential items saw price increases of more than 20 percent between January 2020 and January 2021. Of those items, approximately 1 in 7 was sold directly by Amazon.

U.S. PIRG Education Fund exposed massive price surges for hand sanitizer and masks on Amazon in March 2020. Since then, more than 380,000 supporters have joined CALPIRG and our national network in calling on Amazon to install controls on its platform to prevent sellers from price gouging.

In March 2020, 33 attorneys general issued letters to Amazon, Craigslist, eBay, Facebook and Walmart, urging the marketplaces to adopt more proactive measures to combat price gouging, citing U.S. PIRG Education Fund's report. Shortly after, hundreds of state lawmakers signed onto a letter penned by U.S. PIRG Education Fund reinforcing that call.

## Landmark health care law protects patients from surprise medical billing

**DEC. 27, 2021:** Maybe this has happened to you: After a visit to the hospital or emergency room, you get stuck with an unexpected bill for hundreds or even thousands of dollars from an out-of-network provider.

It's called surprise medical billing, and a bipartisan bill to stop the practice was signed into law on Dec. 27, 2020, as part of a coronavirus relief package. The No Surprises Act will protect patients from "balance-billing," a practice where out-of-network providers charge the difference between their fees and the maximum allowed by patients' insurance.

The law also establishes an arbitration process for providers and insurance companies to work out a reasonable payment to further rein in costs. The No Surprises Act allows even stronger state laws to remain in place.

"This undoubtedly is the most far-reaching consumer health protection that Congress has passed in years," said Patricia Kelmar, our national network's health care campaigns director.

"While the final law is not exactly the legislation we called for, we'll work hard to ensure strong regulations are put in place and consumers know their rights."

## Report finds PPE shortages at 1 in 5 nursing homes this summer

**OCT. 27, 2020:** Protecting our most vulnerable citizens and preventing further COVID-19 outbreaks means making sure our nursing homes have the masks, gowns and hand sanitizer they need to limit the spread of the coronavirus.

But the nation's nursing homes experienced massive shortages of personal protective equipment (PPE) over the summer of 2020, a U.S. PIRG Education Fund and Frontier Group analysis of data collected by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services found.

The Oct. 27 report, covered by the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times and CBS News, found that, in August, a fifth of reporting facilities possessed less than a one-week supply of one or more types of PPE—a critical shortage by industry standards.

"It's appalling that this is how we treat our most vulnerable—our senior citizens and people recovering from a major surgery or illness," said U.S. PIRG Education Fund Consumer Watchdog Teresa Murray.

U.S. PIRG Education Fund recommended in its report that Congress address PPE shortages by passing the Medical Supply Transparency and Delivery Act. ■



Patricia Kelmar advocated for the passage of an Ohio bill to stop surprise medical billing in an interview with *In Focus*, aired on Spectrum News 1, in November 2020.



During the summer of 2020, nursing homes nationwide experienced severe shortages of PPE, found a U.S. PIRG Education Fund report.



*Our national network's director of environment campaigns, Matt Casale, spoke at a policy forum hosted by the League of Women Voters of Massachusetts and Transportation for Massachusetts.*



*Electric cars will be key in the effort to slash health-harming and climate-changing transportation pollution.*

# Transforming transportation

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In 2020, our national research partners at U.S. PIRG Education Fund continued to identify ways to rethink our transportation spending. Meanwhile, our national network threw its support behind a bill to secure vital funding for sustainable transportation. And here in California, we made major progress toward cleaner cars and a healthier climate.

## **California commits to go all-electric on vehicles by 2035**

**OCT. 2, 2020:** California is now home to one of the country's most ambitious plans for electrifying our transportation.

On Sept. 23, Gov. Gavin Newsom issued an executive order requiring that all new cars and passenger trucks in California be zero-emission vehicles by 2035, and banning the sale of new gas-powered cars after that year. The order came as wildfires continued to rage across Western states, bringing the urgency of climate change and the necessity of policies that will mitigate its worst effects into stark relief.

"Gas-powered cars are a major source of air pollution that creates toxic smog and threatens public health," said CALPIRG Executive Director Emily Rusch. "We cannot address climate change without phasing out oil-powered transportation, and we applaud Gov. Newsom for embracing the promise of clean transportation."

As part of our Transform Transportation campaign, CALPIRG continued to advocate not only for cleaner vehicles, but also for more transit, bike and pedestrian infrastructure in the Golden State.

## 'Highway Boondoggles' identifies seven budget-eating highway expansions

**DEC. 8, 2020:** Even with transportation departments scrambling for cash in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, multibillion-dollar highway expansions that made little sense before the pandemic were moving ahead in 2020.

U.S. PIRG Education Fund's sixth edition of "Highway Boondoggles" shines the spotlight on seven budget-eating highway expansion projects across the United States that carry a collective price tag of \$26 billion. Despite their hefty cost, highway expansions often do little to reduce congestion, but saddle states with debt, harm the environment and negatively impact nearby communities.

"If we're smarter about how we spend our transportation dollars, America can build a better world coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic—one with less pollution, less gridlock and more public and active transit," said Matt Casale, director of U.S. PIRG Education Fund's environment campaigns.

The report recommends states cancel the highlighted expansions, among others, and reroute those resources toward much-needed road repair and transit development.

## House transportation spending bill prioritizes fixing infrastructure, sustainable investment

**JUNE 3, 2020:** A 2020 House spending bill signalled changing winds in the movement for cleaner, more efficient transportation. On June 3, federal lawmakers put forward the INVEST in America Act—a nearly \$500 billion transportation spending bill supported by our national network.

While the proposal allotted more than twice as much funding for highways as it did for public transit and rail, it stipulated that funds should be used to repair and improve existing infrastructure before being used on new highway expansions. The bill also included key provisions for expanding public transit, building electric buses and electric vehicle infrastructure, and making streets safer for walking and biking.

"While this bill is not perfect, it represents a major step forward," said our national network's director of environment campaigns, Matt Casale. "It doesn't continue the status quo, and instead takes a new 'fix-it-first' and more carbon-conscious approach to support a safer, cleaner and greener transportation network." ■



Youth advocates at CALPIRG Students (pictured here at a 2019 event to promote clean transit) are helping lead the charge toward more sustainable transportation solutions—including electric buses, which can help cut carbon emissions and are often cheaper to operate in the long term than diesel buses.



*Nathan Proctor, Right to Repair campaign director with our national network, called for the release of ventilator repair documentation and service keys on Pittsburgh's Action News 4 in April 2020.*



*Too often, consumers and third-party repair shops are unable to access the parts and service information needed to fix devices such as cell phones due to manufacturer restrictions.*

# Right to Repair: not taking 'broken' for an answer

Our Right to Repair campaign took on new dimensions in response to the coronavirus pandemic, as medical repair professionals faced repair restrictions in the midst of a public health crisis. In addition, our network's work to empower consumers and third-party repair professionals with the right to repair was recognized by business magazine Fast Company.

## **CALPIRG helps win release of vital service information for ventilators**

**APRIL 22, 2020:** In March 2020, as cases of COVID-19 mounted, it became vitally important that hospitals be able to keep ventilators in service as much as possible. But some manufacturers had restricted access to the repair documentation and service keys that biomedical repair technicians need to fix and maintain these lifesaving devices, prompting action from CALPIRG and our national network.

More than 43,000 petition signers and state treasurers and auditors from nine states joined our network's call for manufacturers to help hospitals confront the pandemic by releasing ventilator service information. And in April, manufacturers including GE, Medtronic and Fisher & Paykel started to make that requested service information available.

"I want to thank ventilator manufacturers for providing access to service documents," said Nathan Proctor, our national network's Right to Repair campaign director. "We hope this also serves as an example of how restricting repair is harmful. When technicians can't access service manuals, it creates unnecessary barriers to fixing lifesaving equipment."

## **Right to Repair named a finalist for Fast Company's 'World Changing ideas'**

**APRIL 28, 2020:** Right to Repair is a simple concept: If you own something, you should be allowed to fix it. Too often, though, we are blocked from repairing our devices for proprietary reasons, leading to unnecessary costs and electronic waste.

In April, business magazine Fast Company selected our national network's Right to Repair campaign as a finalist for its World Changing Ideas awards in the Politics & Policy category.

"We appreciate Fast Company's recognition of the importance of the right to repair," said Nathan Proctor. "It seems like such a simple premise, but it's clear that we need to fight for it."

In 2020, Right to Repair legislation was introduced or carried over in 20 state legislatures. ■

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# 2020 PROGRAM REPORT

## Member Spotlight

Our work is made possible by the support of you, our members. This year we're highlighting the story of one of our national network's members, in her own words.

### Clare Feinson

*As a child, I was often involved in causes I cared about. I collected money for UNICEF at Halloween and I was always up for service projects through the Girl Scouts. My parents were active in political and volunteer organizations and involved me in mailing newsletters, organizing events, leafleting and getting petitions signed.*

*My involvement with PIRG started when I was a graduate student at George Washington University, where I served as the chair of D.C. PIRG for a year. I think your organization has done a great job selecting issues where the public interest needs an advocate. Though I have not been involved in the day-to-day workings of PIRG for a long time, I continue to support the work that you do.*

## Our Staff (partial list)

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Executive Director

**Claudia Deeg**  
Associate

**Faye Park**  
President, U.S. PIRG

**Ed Mierzwinski**  
Senior Director,  
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**Teresa Murray**  
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**Alex Truelove**  
Director, Zero Waste Campaign

**Matt Wellington**  
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**Patricia Kelmar**  
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**Nathan Proctor**  
Director, Campaign for  
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**Danielle Melgar**  
Make It Toxic Free  
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