Finding common ground and making real progress

Dear CALPIRG Member,

Given the partisan rancor in our nation, one might reasonably wonder if it’s still possible for Americans to find common ground and solve problems.

It is. And we have examples:

1. Consumers, patients, doctors and nurses from across the country came together to stop the food industry’s overuse of antibiotics, a practice that leads to antibiotic-resistant bacteria—or “superbugs”—that cut short tens of thousands of lives each year. This wasn’t about red America or blue America, it was all Americans sharing a common interest that convinced McDonald’s to commit to reducing antibiotics in its beef supply chain. (See page 3 for more.)

2. From California to Massachusetts, growing numbers of people agree that it’s time to say goodbye to the single-use consumer plastics that burden our landfills and litter our neighborhoods. Our national network helped win bans on the worst type of single-use plastics, polystyrene foam cups and containers, which are toxic and non-biodegradable. (See page 10.)

3. A bipartisan majority in the last Congress approved a law allowing consumers to freeze their personal credit reports for free—the simplest and most effective step we can take to prevent identity theft. (See page 7 for how our Consumer Watchdog team made it easier for consumers to protect ourselves.)

Many threats to our health and safety cut across political divides. When we get beyond the filter bubbles that inhibit real dialogue in Washington, D.C., and on social media, we can find support for solutions to these problems and others like them.

Your support for CALPIRG is helping to bring people together and find answers for a healthier, cleaner, safer and more secure future for all Americans. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Emily Rusch

Emily Rusch  
Executive Director, CALPIRG
Protecting children from lead

Half of San Francisco’s public schools’ water tested positive for lead
A visualization of the lead problem in San Francisco’s schools painted an alarming picture.

On Oct. 10, CALPIRG Education Fund released an online interactive map of lead tests done in the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) for the 2017-2018 school year. It revealed that drinking water in 66 of the district’s schools tested positive for lead, with results ranging from 1 part per billion to 660 parts per billion.

“Given that even low levels of lead exposure can cause irreversible loss of IQ, San Francisco Unified School District should take action to get out the lead wherever it is getting into drinking water,” said Laura Deehan, public health advocate with CALPIRG Education Fund.

SFUSD has not completed testing on all of its schools’ water fountains and taps, so the results could grow even worse. CALPIRG Education Fund has provided a toolkit for communities to use to help get the lead out of schools.

California protects its youngest
The lives and futures of more than 600,000 California children will soon get a little healthier.

On Sept. 22, then-Gov. Jerry Brown signed a CALPIRG-backed law requiring all day care centers licensed by the California Department of Social Services to test their water for lead starting in 2020. An estimated 600,000 children in the state’s day care centers and preschools drink water that could be contaminated with lead. Children are especially vulnerable to lead poisoning, with consequences ranging from anemia to neurological damage.

“There is a gap here in ensuring safety for all of our students, and we want to make sure the youngest and most vulnerable are protected,” said the bill’s primary author, Assemblymember Chris Holden.

CALPIRG is urging child care centers not to delay in testing their drinking water for lead, and to use filters as a first line of defense against lead exposure.

Photo credits: (above, left to right) Phase4Studios via Shutterstock, CALPIRG.
CALPIRG Public Health Advocate Laura Deehan announces the release of our national network’s “Chain Reaction IV” report, grading restaurants on their antibiotic policies and practices.

CALPIRG advocates stand in front of a local McDonald’s to thank the company for its new policy to start phasing medically important antibiotics out of its beef supply chain.

STOPPING THE MISUSE OF LIFE-SAVING ANTIBIOTICS

Because of your support this past year, CALPIRG and our national network were able to help reduce the overuse of antibiotics on factory farms.

The overuse and misuse of antibiotics in humans, animals and agriculture is creating “superbugs” that are resistant to treatment. The World Health Organization has named antibiotic resistance one of the top 10 global threats to human health. According to an estimate from researchers at Washington University School of Medicine, as many as 162,000 people die from multidrug-resistant infections annually in the U.S., making these infections the third leading cause of death.

CALPIRG and our national network have gathered support from activists, corporate actors and health professionals across the country to address the looming dangers of antibiotic resistance. A group of physicians and health experts, The Health Professional Action Network, is ready to be our voice in the media, in state capitols, and wherever we need to counter misleading claims or advocate for new solutions.

In honor of World Antibiotics Awareness Week in November, our national network partner, U.S. PIRG Education Fund, featured seven infectious disease physicians, specialists, scholars and pediatricians from our Health Professionals Action Network in an eight-part video series. These champions of medicine joined staff to discuss antibiotic resistance and the need to reduce antibiotic use in human and veterinary medicine.

Photo credits: (above, all photos) Anna Azarov Photography; (right page, left to right) Staff, RachelKolokoffHopper via Shutterstock
On Nov. 15, U.S. PIRG Education Fund joined a group of panelists at Harvard University to discuss the future of antibiotics. Speakers presented solutions such as stopping the routine use of antibiotics on factory farms, investing more time and money into developing new antibiotics, and implementing legislation that curbs the overuse of antibiotics.

**Setting off a chain reaction**

In October, CALPIRG released our national network’s “Chain Reaction IV” report grading the top 25 U.S. burger chains on their antibiotics policies. Most, including McDonald’s, received failing grades. BurgerFi and Shake Shack were the only two chains to earn “A” grades for sourcing beef raised without routine antibiotics.

The routine use of antibiotics in livestock significantly contributes to the spread of antibiotic resistance. In fact, nearly two-thirds of the medically important antibiotics sold in the U.S. are intended for use in livestock and poultry operations.

Fast food restaurants, as one of the largest markets for meat in the U.S., can play an instrumental role in pushing producers to use antibiotics responsibly if they commit to only purchasing beef raised without routine antibiotics.

Throughout 2018, CALPIRG and our national network called on McDonald’s to use its influence to take action that could spark an industry-wide shift toward curbing the overuse of antibiotics in the meat industry. Today, we’re pleased to inform you that McDonald’s made a commitment to do just that.

**McDonald’s made a commitment**

Antibiotics vital to human medicine are routinely given to animals to help them survive crowded, stressful and unsanitary conditions, regardless of whether the animals are actually sick, threatening the efficacy of our life-saving medications. That’s why CALPIRG and our national network have been calling on fast food chains such as McDonald’s to phase routine antibiotics out of their beef supply chains.

And in December, McDonald’s showed us it was listening. The company committed to monitor and set reduction targets for antibiotic use in its global beef supply chain by the end of 2020. Whether you eat at McDonald’s or not, this is a huge victory for public health.

“The Golden Arches just raised the bar for responsible antibiotic use in meat production. We can’t afford to misuse these precious medicines. Otherwise, we risk losing our ability to treat life-threatening infections,” said Matt Wellington, director of our national network’s Stop the Overuse of Antibiotics campaign. “McDonald’s new commitment is a promising step forward that will help preserve antibiotics for the future, and that’s something we should all be happy about.”

Infectious disease specialist and member of the Health Professionals Action Network Dr. Sheryl Henderson talking about the dangers of antibiotic overuse in U.S. PIRG Education Fund’s video series for Antibiotics Awareness Week.
Protecting consumers from dangerous products

In 2018, CALPIRG Education Fund and our national Consumer Watchdog team conducted independent testing and research to identify dangers that can pose risks to our health, safety or well-being; and worked hard to get dangerous products off of store shelves.

There are more than 80,000 chemicals on the U.S. market, many of which were never tested for their health impacts. In the absence of government action on some of these products, retailers are stepping up to protect consumers.

Last year, 31-year-old Drew Wynne, the proud owner of a cold brew coffee business, died from toxic fumes while properly using a methylene chloride-based paint stripper. After hearing Drew’s story in May, CALPIRG Education Fund joined a coalition in an effort to get dangerous paint strippers off store shelves.

Along with our coalition partners, we sent Lowe’s more than 7,000 petition signatures, urging the company to drop these deadly products. Lowe’s listened, announcing it would do so by the end of 2018. Next, we shifted our attention to Home Depot and Walmart. After receiving thousands of comments from our network, both retailers announced plans to phase out these paint strippers.
Toxics in kids’ products
In 2018, CALPIRG released a series of reports by our research partners at U.S. PIRG Education Fund. March’s “In Your Face” report found asbestos in three different shimmery makeup products sold at Claire’s, with one containing more than 150,000 fibers of asbestos per gram of product. Asbestos is an extremely dangerous substance that can increase the risk of skin cancer and cause lung cancer, mesothelioma and even death.

Our network quickly alerted Claire’s to these test results, and asked the company to recall the items and inform customers immediately, but representatives refused. CALPIRG is now calling on Congress to pass legislation that will protect our kids by requiring appropriate testing and labeling of cosmetics.

After testing dozens of markers, crayons, binders and more, our research partners found some common school supplies containing asbestos lead or other dangerous substances. Released on Aug. 7, the “Safer School Supplies Shopping Guide” warned consumers about the toxic products we found, and offered suggestions for safer alternatives.

CALPIRG released our national network’s annual “Trouble in Toyland” report in November, identifying unsafe toys that skirted safety regulations and made it onto store shelves and internet marketplaces. Our national network and health professionals across the country held news events to alert parents and others of the dangers some toys pose to children.

We helped convince Lowe’s, Home Depot and Walmart to commit to getting toxic paint strippers off store shelves.

We found health threats such as asbestos, lead and other chemicals in school supplies.

We found slime toys with hazardous levels of boron, toys that are choking hazards without warning labels, and "connected toys" that may disclose private data.

Stay up to date on the latest threats to consumers with the PIRG Consumer Watchdog. Sign up for consumer alerts at www.calpirg.org.
Protecting consumers from data security threats

From standing up for a free and open internet to protecting consumers from identity theft, CALPIRG and our national network are here to help you keep your data safe and secure.

California passed the strongest net neutrality law in the country, and hours later, the U.S. Department of Justice sued the state.

On Sept. 29, then-Gov. Jerry Brown signed a law that prohibits telecommunications companies from blocking or slowing down internet access for broadband customers—the strongest net neutrality law in the nation. Within hours, the Justice Department sued to stop it, arguing that California’s law was illegal since the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has sole authority to create rules for broadband internet.

“With the rollback of strong net neutrality rules at the FCC, California’s law steps in to help ensure consumers still have access to an open internet,” said CALPIRG Executive Director Emily Rusch.

This legal challenge was one of many in a string of court battles over net neutrality: 20 state attorneys general filed suit against the federal rollback of net neutrality. CALPIRG and other consumer groups support a free and open internet.
Our data is now more secure across California
Massive data security threats such as last year’s Equifax breach were a harsh wake-up call about the vulnerability of our personal data, from unwanted sharing to access by identity thieves. In response, CALPIRG has made important progress on data privacy at the state level—where protections can often lay the groundwork for federal action.

CALPIRG and our national network teamed up with the Consumer Attorneys of California to prevent future data breaches and make sure negligent companies can be held accountable. Together, we co-sponsored Senate Bill 1121 to make clear that consumers should have a private right to sue when a breach occurs.

Despite strong industry opposition, this policy was ultimately adopted as part of the California Consumer Privacy Act, which goes further than any other state to give consumers recourse when our personal information is compromised in a breach.

“We hope to work with the attorney general to maximize enforcement of [the California Consumer Privacy Act] and work with the legislature to strengthen consumer privacy protections in the future.”

The Equifax security breach was the largest data breach in history, and our national network has spent the last year helping consumers protect themselves in the aftermath.
Making our democracy more democratic

In 2018, CALPIRG worked to ensure that everyone has a voice in our elections by making sure voter registration is easy, accurate and automatic.

California launches new motor voter law
In April 2018, California’s long-awaited motor voter law went into effect. Now, eligible Californians who apply for driver’s licenses will be automatically registered to vote unless they opt out.

The law modernizes voter registration in our state by merging the voter registration process with the driver’s license application and renewal process, and by eliminating the error-prone paper form system that preceded it.

The law also facilitates the pre-registration of 16- and 17-year-olds who interact with the Department of Motor Vehicles, a crucial CALPIRG-backed provision that encourages civic engagement among the next generation of California voters.

CALPIRG has supported this overdue investment in our democratic system since 2015, because our government is strongest when all citizens make their voices heard on Election Day. With support from our members, CALPIRG will continue our work to modernize our election systems and encourage voter participation.

In historic midterm election, students voted in impressive numbers
Voting is a habit best developed early: When young people register and vote, they’re more likely to keep voting as they grow older.

If the 2018 midterms are any indication, our democracy can depend on the participation of the next generation of Americans. Student voter turnout spiked compared to 2014—a nearly 300 percent upsurge in some places. The Student PIRGs were a significant part of that.

“I promised myself that in 2018 I’d vote no matter what, no matter how long I’d have to wait,” one UC Riverside student voter told CALPIRG Students Organizer Mya Ho. “I’m here because I want to make my voice heard.”

Students working with CALPIRG Students’ New Voters Project helped 30,000 young voters register and made more than 1 million contacts in 11 states, urging students to get out and vote. Turnout was so high that a number of campuses had to open additional polling stations.
A renewed commitment to move us toward zero waste

From electronics to plastics, we throw away too much stuff. Some of this waste could be reused, recycled or repaired. Some of it should never have been produced in the first place. CALPIRG and our national network are tackling America’s trash problem.

Defending our right to repair
If a product you own breaks, you should be able to fix it or find someone who can. But products ranging from dishwashers to smartphones are purposefully made to be difficult, if not impossible, to repair.

“Our while companies profit, the public is forced to pay the price in financial costs and environmental damage,” said Nathan Proctor, director of our national campaign for the Right to Repair.

When Microsoft pressed criminal charges against e-waste recycler Eric Lundgren for copying restore disks that allow people to fix old computers—even though the software on those disks is available online for free—our national network launched an effort to urge Microsoft to work with recyclers, not penalize them.

Over the past year, our national network supported Right to Repair reforms in 18 states, because it shouldn’t be this difficult to keep our products away from the trash heap.

In a victory for the health of our planet, California passes straws upon request bill
California legislators agree: Nothing we use for a few minutes should be allowed to pollute our rivers and oceans for hundreds of years.

On Sept. 20, the state passed Assembly Bill 1884, instructing dine-in, full-service restaurants to give customers plastic straws only upon request. Every day in the United States, people throw away about 175 million plastic straws. Plastic not only harms and kills wildlife, it also releases toxic and carcinogenic chemicals that can have dangerous effects on our health.

“Our economy encourages us to make, use and toss products at the greatest possible speed, and often we don’t think twice about the convenient things we use before throwing them away,” said Emily Rusch, executive director of CALPIRG. “Eliminating unnecessary plastic straws is an easy step we can take to reduce harmful and extraneous waste.”

Already, many Californian cities and counties have banned single-use plastic straws or only made them available upon request, but this is a huge win for our state and our country as a whole. In 2019, CALPIRG and our partners are focusing on passing a broader bill aimed at reducing more types of single-use plastic pollution.
Advocating for 21st-century transportation solutions

Our society is rapidly progressing in the 21st century, and our transportation needs to keep up. Last year, CALPIRG made great strides to help transportation meet California’s changing transportation needs.

Victory: California public buses will be zero-emission by 2040
In 2018, California became the nation’s first state to commit to a 100 percent zero-emission bus fleet. In December, the California Air Resources Board (CARB) unanimously approved stronger purchasing standards, ultimately requiring all public transit buses to emit zero carbon and zero lung-damaging pollutants by 2040.

“Every commitment to electric buses helps bring us closer to the day when clean transportation is the norm rather than the exception,” said CALPIRG Executive Director Emily Rusch. “By committing to all-electric buses, CARB is building on its track record of innovation and environmental stewardship, cleaning up California’s air and setting an example for cities and states around the country.”

CALPIRG and our network partners have worked extensively to make 100 percent electric buses a reality in California.

Fix it first, then build for the future
Even though demand for alternative transportation is gaining popular ground, state leaders continue to pour our tax dollars into highway expansion projects.

Nine highway projects across the country—slated to cost $30 billion—exemplify the need for a fresh approach to transportation planning and spending, according to the fourth annual “Highway Boondoggles” report by our research partners at U.S. PIRG Education Fund.

A $1 billion widening of I-405 that disrupted commutes for five years had no demonstrable success in reducing congestion. Just five months after the widened road reopened, the rush-hour trip took longer than it had while construction was still ongoing.

Additionally, the seventh expansion of the 101 near San Mateo since the 1980s cost $534 million. It’s projected to bring more cars into the already congested area, which directly conflicts with California’s global warming goals.

“The money we spend today decides how we get around tomorrow,” said Matt Casale, our national transportation campaign director. “We need to avoid the type of highway projects that should be in our rearview mirror.”

Photo credits: (above, all photos) Ricky Mackie Photography; (right) Andre M via Wikipedia CC BY-SA 3.0.
2018 ANNUAL REPORT

Emily Rusch
Executive Director

Laura Deehan
Advocate

Faye Park
President, U.S. PIRG

Ed Mierzwinski
Senior Director, Federal Consumer Program

Matt Wellington
Director, Campaign to Stop the Overuse of Antibiotics

Kara Cook-Schultz
Director, Campaign to Ban Roundup

Mike Litt
Director, Campaign to Defend the Consumer Bureau

Alex Truelove
Director, Zero Waste Campaign

Nathan Proctor
Director, Campaign for the Right to Repair

Evan Preston
Senior Director, New Economy Campaigns

Allison Cairo
Vice President and National Field Director

Susan Rakov
Director, Research & Reports

Jenny Douglass
Member Retention Coordinator

Adam Rothschild
Director, National Canvasses

Wendy Wendlandt
Political Director

Marcia Eldridge
Deputy Director, Digital

Elizabeth Ridlington
Senior Policy Analyst

Johanna Neumann
Director, Donor Program

Stay up to date on our campaigns:
www.calpirg.org
facebook.com/CALPIRG
twitter.com/CALPIRG