New campaign to keep plastic out of the Bay

Environment Rhode Island working to ban the bag

Environment Rhode Island has been excited to kick off a new campaign this spring to keep plastic out of Narragansett Bay, working with municipalities across Rhode Island to stop using disposable plastic bags.

Whether you live or work near Narragansett Bay or visit to swim, fish, boat, or spend time with friends and family, all of us in Rhode Island know that there’s nothing more central to our economy, iconic to our state, and valuable to future generations. Yet the Bay’s waters face a serious, enduring pollution threat: plastic.

Hundreds of millions of bags threaten Narragansett Bay

Disposable plastic grocery bags are one of the most common sources of plastic pollution. Rhode Island uses hundreds of millions of these bags every year—littering our parks, rivers, roadsides, and beaches. And once they get into the marine environment, they kill animals like birds, sea turtles and whales that confuse them for food.

And scariest of all? This plastic will never biodegrade. Over time it breaks down into smaller and smaller fragments, which give off toxic pollutants and threaten fish and clams that ingest the tiny plastic bits.

Nothing we use for just five minutes should threaten the Bay and its wildlife for centuries to come. Luckily, the solution is simple. We’re working with Rhode Island towns and cities to lead the way by banning bags now so we can build momentum for a statewide ban.

Warren could be first to ban the bag

This campaign has gained exciting momentum right off the bat. Working with Environment Rhode Island advocates and volunteers, Warren Town Councilman Davison Bolster introduced a town ordinance in April that would ban plastic bags at retail establishments in Warren. Should the bill advance successfully through the council, Warren would be the first municipality in Rhode Island to get rid of plastic bags.

People in the Ocean State understand more than anyone: We can’t let something as unnecessary and wasteful as a grocery bag harm the vital marine environment that we treasure and depend on.

Our Rhode Island bag ban team got petitions signed in Warren.

Learn more about our campaign: [www.EnvironmentRhodeIsland.org](http://www.EnvironmentRhodeIsland.org)
In the world of politics, an election year like this one is often seen as an obstacle to passing strong, pro-environment policies. Conventional wisdom says that with one eye fixed on the polls, office-holders will cling to the status quo rather than risk making waves.

We must demand otherwise: There is never an excuse for weak environmental policy.

As momentum builds into the 2012 election season, we must remember to push not just for strong pro-environment candidates for next year—but also for strong pro-environment policies now. The 2012 election will offer us the opportunity to elect leaders committed to protecting our air, water and open spaces. But even as we look to the future, we must continue to fight now for the strongest protections for the environment we depend on.

Sincerely,

John Rumpler
For Environment Rhode Island

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**Recent action**

**Pressure building for Clean Water Act restoration**

This year, we’re celebrating the 40th anniversary of the Clean Water Act—the key federal law we depend on to keep pollution out of our waterways.

But unfortunately, in the past decade, polluter-friendly Supreme Court decisions have weakened the Clean Water Act by stripping its protections from small streams and wetlands, including many of the smaller waterways that filter and feed Narragansett Bay.

Recently, we convinced dozens of elected officials around Rhode Island to sign onto a letter urging the president to restore these critical protections. When we visited the Washington, D.C., offices of Reps. Jim Langevin and David Cicilline in March, both congressmen agreed to weigh in directly with the Obama administration. Rhode Island is making its voice heard: Don’t mess with Narragansett Bay.

**Report: Nuclear plants threaten R.I. drinking water**

Last year’s nuclear disaster in Fukushima, Japan shone a spotlight on the risks associated with nuclear power. A recent Environment Rhode Island Research & Policy Center report revealed the threat nuclear facilities pose here in Rhode Island.

According to the report, “Too Close to Home,” the drinking water supplies for nearly 65,000 people in Rhode Island lie within 50 miles of active nuclear power plants—the distance the Nuclear Regulatory Commission uses to measure risk to food and water supplies.

“Any radiation exposure from a nuclear plant would increase the risk of cancer and other illnesses,” warned former State Representative Ray Rickman, an outspoken advocate against nuclear power. “Our drinking water is too important to risk radiation contamination. Rhode Island and neighboring states must strive to be nuke-free.”
After a year that saw Rhode Island and many parts of the country hit by record flooding, severe storms, scorching heat and more, a new Environment Rhode Island Research & Policy Center report found that the risks posed by some types of weather-related disasters will likely increase in a warming world. Scientists have already detected increases in extreme precipitation events and heat waves in the United States, and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change recently concluded that global warming will likely lead to further changes in weather extremes.

Every R.I. county impacted by severe weather
Since 2006, according to the report, federally declared weather-related disasters in the United States have affected counties housing 242 million people—or roughly 4 out of 5 Americans—including all five Rhode Island counties. The breadth and severity of weather-related disasters in Rhode Island—coupled with the emerging science on the links between global warming and extreme weather—suggest that we should take strong action to reduce emissions of global warming pollution and take steps to protect our communities from global warming-fueled extreme weather events.

Rhode Island should reduce global warming pollution now and begin planning for a future in which many types of extreme weather events are more severe and occur more frequently.

Rhode Island should adopt clean energy solutions that reduce our dependence on fossil fuels and reduce global warming pollution. Among the most important steps are:

- Adopting enforceable targets, financial incentives, regulatory changes and investment strategies that increase the use of renewable energy sources such as wind and solar power.
- Implementing appliance standards, building codes, enforceable efficiency targets for utilities, fuel-efficiency standards for vehicles and other steps to promote energy efficiency.
- Continuing to develop and implement the fuels and technologies of the future—from electric vehicles to energy storage devices to “smart grid” technologies and new renewable sources of energy.
- Rhode Island should adopt and implement limits on global warming pollution capable of reducing emissions by at least 35 percent below 2005 levels by 2020 and by at least 85 percent by 2050.

Short of economy-wide caps on global warming pollution, Rhode Island should focus on capping and reducing pollution from the largest sources—most notably power plants and the transportation sector. A stronger emissions cap through the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative can help achieve this goal.

Q&A with Rep. Jim Langevin

What inspires your efforts to protect Rhode Island’s environment?

As a native Rhode Islander, I have a great appreciation for our abundant natural resources and the ways they improve our quality of life both by attracting people to visit our state, which helps the economy, and by providing recreational opportunities for our residents. However, good environmental policy is about something more fundamental. We cannot expect to give our children and the generations of Americans who follow the best chance to reach their potential and make our country great if we cannot safeguard the air they breathe and the water they drink.

It’s the 40th anniversary of the Clean Water Act, which protects Rhode Island’s waters. What more can be done to strengthen protections?

Last year brought unprecedented attempts to reverse longstanding protections under the Clean Air and Clean Water Acts by an extreme element that drove the majority party’s agenda. Unfortunately, we may again need to fight proposals similar to one I opposed that would have curtailed our ability to prevent wastewater pollution.

Meanwhile, I continue advocating for local rivers through the Wood-Pawcatuck Watershed Protection Act I introduced with Rep. Joe Courtney (Conn.). It mandates a study to determine areas that provide extraordinary natural benefits and require special attention to maintain. Those zones would receive better upkeep and gain a special designation to preserve their free-flowing condition and water quality.
Our dependence on oil puts our environment, economy, health and security at risk. It’s time for Rhode Island to get serious about breaking our reliance on this dirty, expensive fuel—and luckily, we know how to do it: by increasing the efficiency of our cars and homes, by providing people with more transportation choices, and by investing in new technologies such as electric vehicles.

We’re poised to take a huge step here in Rhode Island with a bill in the General Assembly setting up a plan to put the state on track to reduce total oil use 30 percent by 2030 and 50 percent by 2050. Environment Rhode Island advocates have spearheaded the effort to get this bill introduced and advanced through the legislative process, and at the time of this publication, with the bill having passed 65-3 in the House, we’re confident it will make its way smoothly through the Senate.

Visit us online to learn more about this campaign: www.EnvironmentRhodeIsland.org