Finding common ground and making real progress

Dear WISPIRG member,

Sometimes people ask if it’s frustrating to be involved in political advocacy right now.

Sure, we’ve seen the divisions in our country deepen in recent years, and we’ve watched them harden in Washington, D.C., in ways that make positive action on issues that affect Americans’ lives nearly impossible. That’s frustrating.

But from the beginning, the approach of WISPIRG and our partner groups across the country has been to make progress wherever we can, whenever we can, as best we can—even when things are gridlocked in D.C. That’s as true today as it was in 1971, when PIRG began.

We’ve always believed in overcoming what divides us to make progress. This year, WISPIRG worked with Republicans and Democrats in Congress to introduce a bipartisan bill that would end predatory lending. And together with our national network, we won important changes at the state and local levels.

For example, our Beyond Plastic campaign helped win bans on single-use plastics in cities and communities across the country. In 2019, six more states passed plastic bag bans and Maine, Maryland and Vermont became the first states to ban plastic foam food containers.

As we work to improve air quality and cut down on climate emissions, our Transform Transportation campaign is winning support for public transit, electric buses, electric cars and other clean, healthy alternatives to wasting billions on new or expanded highways.

To protect consumers, our PIRG Consumer Watchdog team continued to search out the hidden dangers in our homes, in the marketplace and at the grocery store. In 2019, U.S. PIRG Education Fund alerted the public to major food and product recalls, and sounded the alarm about unsafe inclined infant sleepers still in use at day cares.

Sure, our leaders in Washington and at the State Capitol should be doing much more on these and other issues. But as you’ll see in the pages that follow, there are still many opportunities to find common ground and make progress for our health, our safety and the quality of our lives.

Thanks to you, our staff and other supporters are seizing every opportunity we can to win positive results for the public.

Peter Skopec
State Director, WISPIRG

P.S. Our staff quickly shifted to working remotely as the COVID-19 crisis swept the United States. But rest assured, we have continued our work to advocate for you and for a healthier, safer world.
Transforming our transportation system

For our health, our safety and our children’s future, we need to make our transportation systems cleaner and more efficient. That’s why, in 2019, we doubled down on our Transform Transportation campaign to reduce the need to drive and to electrify buses and cars—because we believe the easiest, cheapest and most pleasant ways to travel should also be the cleanest and healthiest.

Transit, biking and walking options could keep millennials in Wisconsin

If we want Wisconsin’s young adults to stay here—and improve the quality of life for everyone in our state—we should offer better transportation options.

A survey of more than 600 college students on 24 Wisconsin campuses, released by WISPIRG Foundation on Feb. 12, 2019, found that 75 percent of students said it was important to them to live in a place where they can get around without a car.

“Car culture no longer represents the ‘American Dream’ for many young people,” said Emma Fisher, WISPIRG Foundation organizer and lead author of the report.

Instead, communities that offer a variety of ways to get around—like Madison, Eau Claire and La Crosse—are attracting young people while making life there better for everyone, the report found. Rather than wasting money on highway expansions, Wisconsin should invest in transit, walking and biking infrastructure.

Wisconsin makes it easier to charge electric vehicles, switch to electric buses

It’s going to get easier for Wisconsin drivers to go electric and more likely that Wisconsinites will ride electric buses to get around.

Gov. Tony Evers signed the state budget on July 3, 2019, after using his line-item veto power to redirect $10 million from the Volkswagen “Dieselgate” settlement toward electric vehicle charging infrastructure and $15 million toward replacing polluting buses.

“We applaud Gov. Evers for using his veto pen to move Wisconsin forward,” said WISPIRG State Director Peter Skopec. “The VW settlement funds are a tremendous opportunity to move beyond a polluting transportation system.”

After VW was caught violating emission standards, the automaker agreed to create an “Environmental Mitigation Trust” to be distributed across all 50 states. “The governor’s action today will help make the most of this unique opportunity,” said Peter.
Working to ban Roundup

Since the World Health Organization labeled glyphosate, the main ingredient in Roundup, a probable human carcinogen, we’ve been warning the public and working to ban Roundup unless and until it can be proven safe.

In 2019, two more juries ruled that there was enough evidence to hold Roundup culpable for causing the cancers of three plaintiffs, making that three guilty verdicts since August 2018. More than 42,700 farmers, landscapers, home gardeners and others filed lawsuits claiming Roundup’s makers knew of its cancer risk but failed to warn consumers. And the list of U.S. cities that have banned or restricted glyphosate-based herbicides continues to grow. But Roundup is still putting our health at risk, and more needs to be done.

Public education, member action strengthen call to ban Roundup

The more we educate the public about Monsanto’s weed killer Roundup and other glyphosate-based products, the more support we find for banning them—the residue of which can be found practically everywhere.

In July 2019, WISPIRG and our national network kicked off a summer public education drive in 15 states.

“We’re doing all we can to get the facts to legislators about why we should ban Roundup until and unless it’s proven safe,” said Kara Cook-Schultz, director of our national network’s Ban Roundup campaign. “The support and action of our members are making it easier to get local decision-makers to listen.”

Over the course of the summer, our canvassers enlisted more than 47,000 citizens nationwide to join our call for state leaders to ban Roundup and other glyphosate-based products.

Studies find weed killer in beer and wine

The last thing you want to think about when you pour yourself a glass of wine or a cold beer is whether it contains even small amounts of a potentially carcinogenic weed killer.

But the use of glyphosate, the main ingredient in Monsanto’s Roundup, is now so widespread that the chemical is found virtually everywhere—including, as a Feb. 22, 2019, report from our research partners at U.S. PIRG Education Fund found, in 19 of the 20 beer and wine products tested.

“No matter the efforts of brewers and vintners, [U.S. PIRG Education Fund] found that it is incredibly difficult to avoid ... that consumers will likely drink glyphosate at every happy hour and backyard barbecue around the country,” Kara told USA Today.

WISPIRG and our national network are calling on federal, state and local officials to ban the use of glyphosate. We’ll drink to that.
Moving beyond plastic

With your support this past year, WISPIRG and our national network have made progress to move Wisconsin and our country beyond single-use plastic by getting rid of the most harmful waste and stopping the use of things we truly don’t need.

**Not one, not two, but six more states banned single-use plastic bags**
The number of statewide plastic bag bans in the U.S. multiplied six-fold in 2019, with Maine, New York, Vermont, Connecticut, Delaware and Oregon adding themselves to the list.

The states joined California in requiring retailers and grocers to replace single-use plastic bags with reusable or paper ones. Americans currently throw away 100 billion plastic bags every year, or 300 bags per person. We use these bags for just a few minutes, but they persist in the environment and impact public health for centuries to come.

“These states are leading the country in addressing plastic pollution,” said our national network’s Beyond Plastic campaign director, Alex Truelove. “Clearly, momentum is building on this issue. But these states cannot tackle our plastic pollution crisis alone.”

Together with our national network, WISPIRG is running campaigns to ban single-use plastic bags and other harmful plastics in Wisconsin and across the country.

**Maryland and Maine became the first states to ban plastic foam. Who’s next?**
In 2019, Maryland and Maine became the first states in the U.S. to put bans on foam food containers on the books, but other states aren’t far behind.

On May 24, Maryland became the nation’s second state to ban polystyrene foam cups and containers, after Gov. Larry Hogan let the bill become law without his signature. Maine passed a polystyrene foam ban earlier in the year. Maryland’s ban will go into effect on July 1, 2020, with Maine’s taking effect less than a year later.

“These two states did something historic in becoming the first in the country to ban single-use plastic foam,” said Alex. “Other states should seize the opportunity and follow suit.”

Legislatures in Oregon, New Jersey, Connecticut and Vermont are considering similar bans.

“Nothing we use for five minutes should be allowed to pollute our planet for hundreds of years,” said Alex. “I’m happy to know Maine and Maryland agree. Who’s next?”
Stopping the overuse of antibiotics

The idea that our antibiotics might no longer work in the near future is alarming. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimate that at least 35,000 Americans die every year from drug-resistant infections—that’s one person dying every 15 minutes. Other researchers suggest the number of deaths could be nearly five times as many. It’s clear that we need to take urgent action to stop the overuse of antibiotics and keep our life-saving medicines working when we need them.

WISPIRG and our national network have been hard at work for the last five years to preserve the effectiveness of antibiotics, building a network of leading health professional advocates, and convincing the country’s biggest restaurant chains to stop serving meat raised on the routine use of antibiotics. Here’s some of the ongoing work you’ve helped make possible in 2019.

45,000 tell the EPA: Don’t let growers spray antibiotics on citrus trees
Antibiotic overuse is becoming a global health crisis, threatening to make life-saving medicines ineffective. Yet the Trump administration is moving to allow growers to spray 650,000 pounds annually of these life-saving medicines on citrus trees.

On March 13, 2019, advocates from the research and policy arm of our national network, U.S. PIRG Education Fund, delivered signatures from more than 45,000 people asking the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to deny the proposal.

“The more you use antibiotics, the greater the risk that bacteria resistant to the drugs will flourish and spread. The bottom line is that the potential problems created by spraying massive amounts of strepto-
mycin on citrus fields could outweigh the original problem the EPA wants to solve,” said Matt Wellington, who directs U.S. PIRG Education Fund’s Stop the Overuse of Antibiotics campaign.

Spraying antibiotics on citrus fields is supposed to combat citrus greening, but it won’t cure or prevent the spread of the disease. On top of that, the EPA has clearly not fully considered the consequences of this unprecedented antibiotic use.

**We launched a campaign calling on Wendy’s to ‘Hold the Antibiotics’ from its beef supply chain**

How can the country’s third-largest burger chain help save the cornerstone of modern medicine? By buying only beef raised without the routine use of antibiotics.

On March 28, 2019, WISPIRG and our national network launched our campaign to convince Wendy’s to do just that. The CDC now estimates that 35,000 Americans die each year due to antibiotic-resistant infections. Large meat buyers such as Wendy’s can help keep our antibiotics effective by only sourcing beef from livestock farms that don’t overuse our medically important antibiotics.

“We can’t waste life-saving medicines to produce cheap beef. Wendy’s can use its buying power to help move the beef industry away from overusing antibiotics,” said Matt, who directs our national network’s Hold the Antibiotics: Wendy’s campaign.

Wendy’s no longer serves chicken raised on medically important antibiotics. But the chain earned only a D- on the 2019 Chain Reaction scorecard authored by our research partner U.S. PIRG Education Fund, which graded top burger chains on antibiotics use in their beef supply chains.

**Superbugs Unplugged: U.S. PIRG launched a podcast about antibiotic resistance**

Get ready for some alarming stories—which are all the more alarming because they’re true.

On Nov. 14, 2019, our partner U.S. PIRG and the Antibiotic Resistance Action Center (ARAC) of George Washington University launched “Superbugs Unplugged,” a podcast that will dive into the alarming issue of rising antibiotic resistance. Matt co-hosts the podcast with Dr. Lance Price of ARAC.

“[It’s just] totally baffling to me [that] we treat these drugs, not as the life-saving medicines that they are, but as tools in agriculture and wherever else we’re using them,” said Matt in the podcast’s inaugural episode. “I’m really excited for this podcast ... to be a forum for how we address this problem comprehensively.”

The approach of an era when, because of overuse, our antibiotics might no longer work, and what used to be common, treatable infections may become deadly, is truly terrifying. Our podcast will educate the public and promote solutions to avoid this nightmare scenario.
PIRG Consumer Watchdog on the case

For more than 40 years, our national network has been warning consumers about hidden dangers and helping them to protect themselves. In 2019, our Consumer Watchdog team continued to be on the case: We advocated for policies to protect consumers in the financial marketplace, worked to educate people about how to defend themselves from data breaches, and more to keep consumers safe and secure.

Bipartisan bill would cap predatory payday lending rates

A bipartisan bill promises to protect vulnerable American consumers from predatory lending practices.

The bill, introduced by U.S. Rep. Glenn Grothman (R, Glenbeulah) in November 2019, would cap interest rates on consumer loans at a 36 percent Annual Percentage Rate (APR). The WISPIRG-backed legislation aims to make payday, car title and installment loans with astronomically high interest rates a thing of the past.

“Payday loans come with average interest rates of 486 percent in Wisconsin,” said WISPIRG State Director Peter Skopec. “An interest rate cap is the simplest, most effective way to stop these debt trap loans.”

Payday, car title and installment loans are often marketed as fast cash for people struggling to make ends meet. But the majority of borrowers are unable to afford repayment and are forced into a spiral of reborrowing that leads to perpetual indebtedness.

“We’re thrilled to see the bipartisan leadership of Rep. Grothman and his colleagues on this critical issue,” Peter concluded.
WISPIRG Foundation opposed debt collection rule that compromises privacy, subjects consumers to harassment

The agency charged with protecting the financial interests of consumers is planning to lend a hand to debt collectors.

In October 2019, WISPIRG Foundation submitted hundreds of public comments to the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) in opposition to a rule that would allow debt collectors to call customers far too frequently—seven calls per debt, per week for the same customer. The rule would also allow debt collectors to leave so-called “limited content” messages about “accounts” with third parties or on answering machines—a threat to consumer privacy.

“Debt collection problems, including mistakes, affect every sector of society,” wrote WISPIRG Foundation State Director Peter Skopec, referring to security clearances denied to service members with outstanding debts, disproportionate collection difficulties faced by people of color, and rising rates of debt among the elderly and students.

In September 2019 WISPIRG Foundation hosted a workshop to educate residents about predatory financial practices at the annual Poverty Matters summit, and is continuing to campaign for fair debt collection in Wisconsin.

In the wake of the Capital One data breach, Ed Mierzwinski and Adam Garber explain how to protect your credit

Were you affected by the Capital One breach, one of the largest thefts of data from any bank to date?

On July 29, 2019, a massive data theft at Capital One was revealed, including the exposure of social security numbers and other data of more than 100 million people. So what can you do to protect yourself from this and other breaches? As PIRG Consumer Watchdog Adam Garber told The Wall Street Journal, “Freeze your credit immediately.”

Ed Mierzwinski, senior director of our national network’s federal consumer program, explained to C-SPAN’s Washington Journal, “Your social security number and your birthday are ... [your] financial DNA. They have a very long shelf life.”

Even if you’ve never had your identity stolen, it only takes one breach for hackers to cause you headaches and potential financial harm. Protecting yourself now can save you from significant financial issues down the road, even if you don’t bank with Capital One.

Remember: “Freeze your credit immediately.”

WISPIRG is continuing to advocate for passage of a bill that would cap interest rates on consumer loans at a 36% Annual Percentage Rate.

Right now, the best way to protect yourself from new account identity theft is to freeze your credit at all three credit bureaus. You can find instructions at: https://uspirg.org/feature/usp/credit-report-freeze.
2019 PROGRAM REPORT

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