



# WISPIRG

Wisconsin Public Interest Research Group



2017 Annual Report

# Because Of You: An Update On Our Program Work In 2017

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*Dear WISPIRG member,*

*Why does such a great country have so many problems?*

*I'm talking about problems that we all share—problems that threaten or impact all of Americans' wellbeing. Problems that are neither liberal nor conservative issues. Problems of the public interest.*

*At WISPIRG we seek to address those problems. Because in this day and age, Americans shouldn't tolerate them.*

*For example, we shouldn't have to sacrifice consumer protection in order to reap the benefits of a robust financial sector in our economy. Over the past year, WISPIRG worked to keep the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, the nation's top consumer cop on the Wall Street beat, strong and independent.*

*Nor should we accept that if we want access to credit, our private information must be at risk of falling into the hands of hackers and thieves. In the wake of the Equifax hack, WISPIRG state and federal advocates led the call for free credit freezes—the best available safeguard against identity theft.*

*Nor does it make sense to gamble with the efficacy of life-saving antibiotics so the food industry can use them to raise cheaper chicken, beef and pork. In 2017, WISPIRG's antibiotics team helped convince KFC to join 14 other top chain restaurants in the U.S. that have taken steps to end the routine use of antibiotics in the meat they serve.*

*Finally, in this day and age we shouldn't have to worry whether our kids are safe when they play with toys or drink water. Last year, Target agreed to stop selling certain fidget spinners after WISPIRG Foundation research found unsafe lead levels. WISPIRG Foundation research also revealed that lead is more prevalent in school drinking water than previously known, and our on-the-ground organizing prompted the Wisconsin Legislature to act.*

*Read on to learn more how WISPIRG staff and members worked together to find solutions to more problems we should no longer tolerate. None of our work would have been possible without the support of members like you.*

*Sincerely,*

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'P. Skopec', with a horizontal line underneath.

*Peter Skopec  
State Director, WISPIRG*



**STANDING UP FOR VETERANS**—Ed Mierzwinski, Federal Consumer Program senior director, spoke to veterans about the Consumer Bureau’s work to protect servicemembers.



**ENDING DEBT TRAPS**—WISPIRG and University of Wisconsin law students teamed up for a “Shark Week” day of action to draw attention to the harms of predatory lending.

# Defending The Consumer Bureau

In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crash, WISPIRG and our national network helped create the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) to serve as our consumer cop on the financial beat. The agency has excelled at its mission, returning \$12 billion to 29 million consumers hurt by big banks and lenders in just six years.

## The CFPB Is Under Attack

In 2017, the Trump administration, special interests and their allies in Congress ramped up attacks on the CFPB in the name of reducing regulation. We were there defending the agency every step of the way.

We filed court briefs supporting former CFPB Director Richard Cordray’s appointment of consumer champion Leandra English to the role of acting director when President Trump put long-time agency opponent Mick Mulvaney in charge. And our staff fought back against the so-called Financial CHOICE Act, legislation that would have gutted the agency as we know it.

Ed Mierzwinski, Federal Consumer Program senior director, testified before multiple Congressional committees in opposition to bills intended to weaken consumer protections enacted by the Consumer Bureau—including legislation that would have dramatically reduced mortgage market safeguards.

Here in Wisconsin, our staff celebrated the Consumer Bureau’s sixth anniversary during Discovery Channel’s “Shark Week” by highlighting the agency’s work to protect consumers from predatory lenders that prey on everyday Wisconsinites. WISPIRG staff were joined by members of the University of Wisconsin Law School’s Consumer Law Clinic, who work with people directly harmed by financial companies and predatory lenders.

## Standing Up For Our Consumer Cop

WISPIRG Foundation research emphasized how many Americans benefit from the Consumer Bureau’s work. One 2017 WISPIRG Foundation report found that, because of CFPB action in response to complaints, at least 7,000 servicemembers have received either direct monetary relief or other kinds of relief, like stopping debt collection harassment or providing mortgage options to help a servicemember avoid foreclosure. Another report highlighted the Consumer Bureau’s work to protect older Americans from mortgage, credit and debt collection abuses.

It’s clear: The idea of the Consumer Bureau needs no defense, only more defenders. That’s why WISPIRG canvassers spoke to 11,000 Wisconsinites in the summer, mobilizing 3,100 to sign our petition to Congress urging lawmakers to keep the bureau strong and independent. ■



**KEEPING OUR MEDICINES EFFECTIVE**—Hannah Kim, a public interest advocate with our sister group Illinois PIRG Education Fund, spoke at the release of a report ranking America's largest fast food restaurants on policies relating to antibiotic use in their supply chains.

## Standing Up For Public Health

Thanks to your support in 2017, WISPIRG and WISPIRG Foundation worked to reduce the overuse of antibiotics, get the lead out of school drinking water, and cut the use of dangerous chemicals in farming.

### Save Our Antibiotics

Antibiotic overuse, especially on factory farms, breeds antibiotic-resistant superbugs that kill tens of thousands of Americans, and sicken millions more, every year. We shouldn't raise our food in ways that put public health at risk.

That's why WISPIRG Foundation and our national network have worked hard to push major restaurant chains to eliminate meat raised on antibiotics from their menus. In 2017, we helped convince KFC to join a growing list of companies that have pledged to stop serving chicken raised on human antibiotics, and this work has helped to spark an industry-wide shift.

The sale and distribution of medically important antibiotics for food production in the U.S. dropped 14 percent in 2016, according to the Food and Drug Administration, marking the first year-to-year decline in sales since recording began. Because of market-based action, we estimate that in the near future, close to half the chicken in this country will be raised without the routine use of medically important antibiotics.

WISPIRG Foundation's research and reports added to this urgent campaign, and earned widespread media coverage. Last fall, the group published its "Chain Reaction" report, which ranks the country's largest fast food and fast casual restaurants on policies relating to antibiotic use in their supply chains.

And with the help of our Health Professional Action Network—a group of more than 40,000 physicians and other health workers who have signed on to our efforts to combat antibiotic overuse—WISPIRG’s national network will be supporting state-level legislation to curb antibiotic overuse across the country.

## Get The Lead Out

We now know that Flint, Mich., was just the tip of the lead-laden iceberg. Schools across the country have tested high for lead in drinking water—and thousands of children in Wisconsin are at risk.

WISPIRG has been drawing attention to this quiet public health crisis and working to solve it by sounding the alarm in the press, and backing legislation that will help get lead pipes out of homes, schools and daycares.

A 2017 report by WISPIRG Foundation confirmed the urgency of the issue, and pushed municipalities and school districts across the state to be proactive in testing, pipe and fixture removal, and filtering—and the research helped spark results.

In early 2018, after WISPIRG mobilized hundreds of healthcare professionals and Wisconsin families to call on the state Legislature to act on lead in drinking water, our advocates celebrated the passage of Leading On Lead, a bill that will allow water utilities to help pay for removal of lead service lines—the top source

of lead contamination in drinking water. Gov. Scott Walker signed the bill in February.

“Protecting children from lead exposure will require committed, long-term action at every level of government,” said WISPIRG Director Peter Skopec. “Passing the Leading On Lead bill is an important step in the right direction. We’re grateful to the sponsors and supporters of this bill, to the hundreds of healthcare professionals who weighed in, and to the thousands of Wisconsinites who contacted their legislators urging action.”

## Healthy Farms, Healthy Families

Research shows we can dramatically reduce the use of synthetic chemicals in farming, while still growing as much food as we do today. It’s shortsighted and dangerous to soak crops in chemicals when we know there are safe and effective alternatives.

In 2017, Rep. Earl Blumenauer (Ore.) unveiled a new blueprint for the federal Farm Bill—legislation that would cut wasteful agriculture subsidies that steer farmers toward harmful and unhealthy farming practices. The bill would also deepen U.S. investments in proven conservation programs that help farmers switch to sustainable farming practices.

With the help of our members, WISPIRG’s national network will continue to support bills like this and keep up our pursuit of common-sense farming regulations that protect our families, land and food. ■



**CLEAN WATER IN WISCONSIN**—WISPIRG celebrated the passage of a bill that will allow water utilities to help pay for removal of lead service lines—the top source of lead contamination in drinking water.



**HEALTHY FARMS, HEALTHY FAMILIES**—WISPIRG’s national network will continue to support policies that reduce the use of toxic chemicals in agriculture, and protect our families, land and food.

## EQUIFAX BREACH &amp; CONGRESSIONAL RESPONSE

MIKE LITT  
U.S. PIRGWASHINGTON  
JOURNAL

**RESPONDING WITH RESOURCES**—In the wake of the massive data breach at Equifax, Campaign Director Mike Litt spoke to national media outlets to inform consumers about how best to protect themselves.

## A Consumer Watchdog

In 2017, WISPIRG and WISPIRG Foundation warned consumers about defective cars, provided important resources after the Equifax data breach, and pushed for stronger consumer protections.

### Nearly 148 Million Americans At Risk: Our Response To Equifax

In September 2017, the credit bureau Equifax announced it had been hacked, potentially compromising the most sensitive financial data of nearly 148 million Americans—everything from credit card information to Social Security numbers.

The breach was unprecedented, and left a massive number of consumers vulnerable to identity theft and other devastating financial scams.

Our consumer advocates were able to provide urgent informational resources to affected consumers, testify before multiple Congressional committees about the Equifax hack and data security, and make the case for better consumer protections in the media.

In Massachusetts, our sister group's state staff campaigned in support of a bill that would eliminate the fees Bay State residents pay to freeze or thaw their credit—one of the only ways to prevent new account identity theft after a hack. After months of work with a diverse array of stakeholders, including Attorney General Maura Healey, MASSPIRG celebrated the bill's passage in the House in early 2018.

We will continue to support state and federal legislation that would make credit freezes free for all Americans, and work to give consumers more control over their credit reports and other personal information.

## Product Safety

For more than three decades, WISPIRG has worked to ensure the products we buy are safe—everything from the toys our children play with to the cars we drive.

In the fall, WISPIRG Foundation discovered two models of fidget spinners sold at Target that contained alarming levels of lead—up to 300 times the legal limit for lead in children’s products. Within days of releasing our findings, Target had pulled both fidget spinner models from its shelves.

A 2017 report released by our sister group, MASSPIRG Education Fund, found that CarMax—the nation’s largest used car retailer—has more than doubled the percentage of defective cars for sale since 2015. We worked hard to publicize the research nationwide and warn consumers in the market for used cars.

## Defending Net Neutrality

WISPIRG has campaigned for years in support of the simple idea that the web is a public resource, and internet service providers shouldn’t get to pick winners and losers.

In 2017, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) dealt a devastating blow to that concept, known as net neutrality, by ending regulations that keep the internet free and open for consumers.

Still, legislators are making headway in efforts to overturn the FCC’s repeal at the state and federal levels, and, with support from our members, WISPIRG will continue to back proposed protections that keep consumers in the driver’s seat online. ■

## Consumer Protection

WISPIRG and WISPIRG Foundation work to ensure consumers are protected from dangerous products and unfair market practices. With your help, we’ll continue to amplify the voices of Americans across the country.



1 WISPIRG Foundation research and advocacy spurred Target to remove two models of lead-laden fidget spinners from its shelves.



2 Abe Scarr (right), director of our sister group, Illinois PIRG Education Fund, spoke at the launch of “Trouble In Toyland,” a report by our national network released at 39 different press conferences across the country.



3 U.S. PIRG Education Fund Campaign Director Kara Cook-Schultz spoke to national media outlets about the dangers posed by toys that contain toxics.





**MOVING FORWARD**—WISPIRG Organizer Emma Fisher spoke to media at our coalition press conference, celebrating the cancellation of the I-94 highway expansion.



**ASSESSING TRANSIT NEEDS**—Hundreds of activists and advocates gathered for our coalition's statewide transportation summit and training in Milwaukee.

## Stopping Highway Boondoggles

Wisconsinites agree: Our transportation infrastructure needs an upgrade. But despite a mounting repair and maintenance backlog and changing transportation needs, federal, state and local governments continue to prioritize wasteful highway projects over fixing crumbling roads, bridges and transit nationwide.

That's why we were excited to celebrate a major campaign victory in 2017 when Gov. Scott Walker pulled the plug on the expansion of I-94's East-West Corridor in Milwaukee. The 3.5-mile expansion would have cost close to \$1 billion, and would have diverted money away from more pressing infrastructure investments.

Over the last three years, members of our coalition turned out hundreds of people to public hearings, mobilized thousands of community members and leaders, released research reports, and even filed a lawsuit, all in support of a responsible alternative that would fix the highway without expanding it and create a modern transportation network for the region.

WISPIRG Organizer Emma Fisher said the cancellation of the I-94 expansion should be a turning point for Wisconsin, a marker of the shift toward forward-looking infrastructure that meets 21st-century needs.

"Young people today are less car-focused than previous generations—they want to live in

places where they can get around without a car, and where they can bike, bus or walk to work," Fisher said. "At the same time, the Milwaukee region's aging population will need non-driving alternatives to get around in the near future."

Now that the expansion is off the table, we'll continue to call on the Wisconsin Department of Transportation to go back to the drawing board and develop a proposal that will improve our quality of life, keep us safer, and reduce our dependence on individual, fossil-fueled vehicles.

### Jumpstarting EV Investment

Since the Volkswagen scandal broke, WISPIRG has worked to hold the automaker accountable for deceiving customers and hurting the environment by installing car software designed to cheat emissions tests.

In 2017, WISPIRG Foundation found that \$2.9 billion from the Volkswagen settlement will go to states to help clean up the country's transportation system—a fitting use for the penalty. We recommended states use the funds to purchase electric vehicle fast-charging stations for highways, coupled with an aggressive expansion of all-electric transit buses to replace aging, dirty, diesel buses. If implemented, the recommendations would complement federal anti-pollution rules enacted in response to a recent lawsuit brought by U.S. PIRG and our coalition partners. ■



**SAFE ALTERNATIVES**—In 2017, our national network and coalition partners delivered petitions urging L’Oreal to remove chemicals of concern from its products.



**DIRTY AND DANGEROUS**—Our national network will continue advocating for legislation that prioritizes cleaning up the country’s most dangerous waste sites.

# Protecting You From Toxic Chemicals

## Banning Bee-Killing Pesticides

Chemical pesticides have played a disturbing role in the unprecedented decline of bee populations—a phenomenon that has real consequences for our food supply, environment and economy.

Last year, we launched our Ban Bee-Killing Pesticides campaign in an effort to save this important pollinator. We’re working at the state level to ban the sale and use of a class of pesticides known as neonicotinoids, or neonics, which scientists say is one factor in bee population decline. Our national network will continue working with our members to ban these dangerous pesticides unless and until they’re proven safe.

## Pledge To Be Toxic-Free

WISPIRG and our national network are working to increase transparency about what chemicals are used in personal care products and to eliminate chemicals of concern from these products entirely—and pressure from concerned consumers is already leading to important industry shifts.

In 2017, SC Johnson—maker of Glade, Pledge, Windex and more—disclosed the presence of 368 potential skin allergens that might occur in its products. Unilever, which owns brands like

Dove and Caress, committed to disclosing most of its fragrance ingredients, and even Procter & Gamble, maker of brands like Olay, Old Spice and Herbal Essences, announced that it will increase fragrance ingredient transparency in all of its consumer brands.

## Post-Hurricane Toxic Threats

Last year, our national network worked hard to provide timely informational resources to residents affected by hurricanes Harvey, Irma and Maria, and to convince government officials to secure the most dangerous toxic sites.

In September, U.S. PIRG Education Fund released a report chronicling the contaminants and health concerns associated with the flooded Superfund sites in Texas, and U.S. PIRG published numerous articles in media outlets including Huffington Post and The Hill outlining the importance of safety regulations at chemical facilities.

Thanks to member support, our outreach made an impact. The EPA committed to cleaning one of the most dangerous sites affected by Harvey, and in early 2018, the Government Accountability Office told Congress it would investigate the risks that natural disasters pose to the more than 1,300 sites in the EPA’s Superfund program. ■

## WISPIRG

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