Graduate and Professional Student Assembly

Resolution 4: Single-Use Plastic Phaseout

Abstract: Phasing out single-use plastics through a five-year transition, aligning campus practices with Cornell's commitments to sustainability, environmental stewardship, and community well-being.

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Whereas, single-use plastics cause environmental damage and undermine Cornell's commitment to sustainability—demonstrated through initiatives such as the world-renowned Atkinson Center. The toxic chemicals commonly found in plastic can take anywhere from 100 to 1,000 years or more to decompose, and with less than 10% of plastic in the world actually being recycled, plastic waste continues to accumulate at an alarming rate in landfills and oceans;

Whereas, single-use plastic is actively detrimental to the health of the Cornell community. Microplastics are increasingly being found in the brain, testes, heart, stomach, lymph nodes, placenta, urine, breast milk, and semen, and are associated with adverse effects, including cancers, diabetes, neurotoxicity, and reproductive toxicity;

Whereas, Cornell's commitments to building "A Community of Belonging" and "Changing Lives through Public Engagement" requires attention to the broader social impacts of plastic production and waste. Plastic production and waste, particularly, threaten the health and livelihoods of low-income communities. In the United States, predominantly African American and Indigenous communities are vulnerable targets for petrochemical corporations, which intentionally dump toxic waste from plastic production. Water contamination in these communities restricts access to reliable drinking water, further contributing to illness and widening existing health disparities;

Whereas, a commitment to "Respect for the Natural Environment" and the goals of Cornell's research demand careful consideration of the ecological impacts of plastic use. Plants exposed to microplastic particles exhibit reduced growth due to stress, changes in chemical composition, disruptions in hormone regulation, and reductions in photosynthesis through altered chlorophyll.

1,557 species ingest plastic, while 99% of marine species contain microplastics, which can block digestive tracts and pierce internal organs, causing animal mortality. Microplastics damage animal livers and cells and disrupt reproductive systems, threatening population growth;

Whereas, recycling is not a solution; many falsehoods about recycling have been pushed by the fossil fuel companies that make plastics, are impeding international plastics treaties, and are intending to ramp up plastic production in the coming years; in fact, no more than 9% of plastic waste is successfully recycled, and the process is expensive and often itself polluting;

Whereas, Cornell's tap water quality is excellent, and healthier for bodies and ecosystems than plastic-bottled water; it is estimated that Cornell uses 4000 plastic water bottles every day;

Whereas, there will be some upfront costs associated with shifting away from single-use plastics, but there will also be savings: the SUNY colleges are finding that they are already saving money on waste collection; and the real cost of plastic, taking externalities like health and environmental impacts into account, is much higher than the prices we currently pay for it;

Whereas, the SUNY system has banned single-use plastics. It is shameful that Cornell, an Ivy League university that prides itself as a sustainability leader, is opting out of this policy;

Whereas, many other colleges and universities, including the University of Vermont, the University of Virginia, University of Colorado-Boulder, Syracuse University, and the University of California, have already phased out or are in the process of phasing out single-use plastics, and some units within Cornell are already doing so, including the Statler Hotel, Slope Day, and several dining facilities;

Whereas, businesses such as Dish Truck, Bevi, and Quench Buggy offer alternatives to single-use plastics, and the University of Colorado Boulder successfully renegotiated its contract with Pepsi to eliminate single-use plastics from campus beverage services;

Whereas, the student body has wanted to ban single-use plastics since 2010 as demonstrated by the Student Assembly's passage of Resolution 35: Taking Back the Tap to phase out plastic bottle usage, which was never implemented;

Whereas, in the response to the passing of this Resolution in the Faculty Senate, President Kotlikoff announced instituting a task force on this subject that will present "initial recommendations by the end of this academic year";

Whereas, graduate students carry out a majority of the lab-based research at Cornell and thus have direct personal insights into how plastic can be reduced in the research context;

Be it therefore resolved, Cornell University shall eliminate single-use plastics, wherever possible, according to a five-year phase-out program from the date a ban is passed;

Be it further resolved, where elimination is not practical, single-use plastic products will be replaced with BPI-certified compostable products. The university may make specific, limited exceptions for health (such as ADA accommodations), safety, and research where there are no existing alternatives;

Be it further resolved, that the president's task force will publicly report its initial recommendations to the University as a whole and present its findings to the GPSA before the end of this academic year;

Be it further resolved, that these recommendations shall include objectively quantifiable actions for the university to take and provide a clear road map and provide proposals for concrete administrative changes necessary to implement the five-year phase-out plan;

Be it further resolved, that the task force shall include at least 1 member chosen by the GPSA to represent the graduate student voice;

Be it finally resolved, Cornell will adhere to its stated core value of "Respect for the Natural Environment" by "acting in ways to live and work sustainably" via phasing out single-use plastics.

Respectfully submitted,

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