Resolution 5: Single-Use Plastic Phaseout

Abstract: This resolution proposes that Cornell University phase out single-use plastics and adopt sustainable alternatives across campus operations.

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Whereas, the toxic chemicals commonly found in plastic take between 100 to 1,000 years or more to decompose, and because less than 10% of plastic in the world is actually recycled, there is a colossal build up of plastic waste in landfills and oceans. Actively contributing to this environmental damage runs contrary to Cornell's commitments to sustainability, such as our world-renowned Atkinson Center;

Whereas, plastic breaks down in human bodies, with microplastics increasingly found in the brain, testicles, heart, stomach, lymph nodes, placenta, urine, breastmilk, and semen, with impacts that include cancers, diabetes, neurotoxins, and reproductive toxicity. Single-use plastic is actively detrimental to the health of the Cornell community;

Whereas, plastic production and waste particularly threaten the health and livelihood of low-income communities. In the United States, predominantly African American and Indigenous communities are particularly vulnerable targets for petrochemical industries, which intentionally dump toxic waste from plastic production. Water contamination in these communities restricts people's access to reliable drinking water, further contributing to illness and health disparities. These inequities run counter to two of Cornell's core values: building "A Community of Belonging" and "Changing Lives through Public Engagement"—a commitment to "our community, our state, and the broader world, learning about their needs and strengths, and applying the knowledge we create for the benefit of society";

Whereas, globally, wealthy nations dump chemical and toxic waste from plastic production onto poorer countries, commonly in Africa and Asia. With limited resources to properly dispose of this waste, these countries often unsafely burn the waste, which contributes to the contamination of their local environments and communities. Purchasing goods that further global inequality undermines the goals of valuable Cornell programs like the CALS Ashley School of Global Development and the Environment and the Center for the Study of Inequality;

Whereas, plastics harm ecosystems. Plants exposed to microplastic particles have reduced growth due to stress, changes in chemical composition, alterations in hormone regulation, and

reductions in photosynthesis through alterations in chlorophyll. Studies have also revealed that 1,557 species in both marine and terrestrial environments are known to ingest plastic, which can block digestive tracts and pierce internal organs, causing animals to choke and die. Current research confirms that microplastics can cause damage to animal livers and cells, and disrupt their reproductive systems, also threatening population growth. Studies show that 99% of marine species contain microplastics. Purchasing single-use plastics therefore runs contrary to another of Cornell's core values, "Respect for the Natural Environment";

Whereas, plastic production is a major emitter of greenhouse gases, which are significant contributors to climate change. Plastic is a petroleum by-product and cannot be separated from the fossil fuel industry, which has knowingly deceived the public about climate science, and sought to undermine research done here at Cornell;

Whereas, banning plastics can save money for the university in the long term due to lower greenhouse gas emissions, reduced waste processing burdens and other environment and social harms;

Whereas, Cornell's tap water quality is excellent, and healthier for bodies and ecosystems than plastic bottled water. The student body has wanted to ban single-use plastics since 2010, including the passage of a Student Assembly plastic bottle phase-out resolution, which was never implemented;

Whereas, the SUNY system has banned single-use plastics. Cornell has the privilege to be exempt from SUNY policies, despite the fact that several of our colleges are part of the SUNY system. Opting out of SUNY policy to avoid a ban on single-use plastics that would benefit both the student body and the environment is shameful for an Ivy League university that prides itself on sustainability;

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

Be it therefore resolved, Cornell University shall eliminate single-use plastics (products likely to be used by a consumer only once before being discarded) according to a five-year phase-out program from the date a ban is passed. 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, safety, and research where there are no existing alternatives;

Be it finally resolved, Cornell will adhere to its stated values of sustainability and equality by phasing out single-use plastics.

Appendix A: Definitions

Single-use plastic products are those designed or likely to be used by a consumer only once before being discarded. Single use plastic products may be made from fossil fuel-based plastics or biobased materials (bioplastics) or a combination of both. They may be recyclable or compostable. Single-use plastic products include, but are not limited to, the following products:

Plastic is "a lightweight, hygienic and resistant material which can be moulded in a variety of ways and utilized in a wide range of applications." Most plastics are not capable of undergoing biological decomposition in a compost facility but will photodegrade and create microplastics.

i. **Biobased materials or bioplastics** are those that are produced from renewable raw materials. Biobased materials are not necessarily biodegradable or compostable. Often, biobased materials are made from fiber crops such as hemp and flax, bamboo, sugarcane, etc.
ii. **Biodegradable plastics** are plastic materials that will decompose through biological processes, resulting in harmless bi-products. They may be made from renewable raw materials but may also be made using crude oil or natural gas.
iii. **Fossil fuel-based plastics** are the most commonly used. These items are often comprised of polyethylene terephthalate (PET), high-density polyethylene (HDPE), polyvinyl chloride (PVC), low-density polyethylene (LDPE), polypropylene (PP), polystyrene (PS), expanded polystyrene foam (EPS) poly(methyl methacrylate) (PMMA), non-BPI certified polylactic acid (PLA), and paper or paperboard lined with wax or any of the listed plastics.

Photodegrade: this process occurs when plastics break down into smaller and smaller pieces due to UV irradiation, eventually becoming microplastics, which release harmful chemicals into the environment.

Recyclable is able to be recycled. Although many products may be marketed as recyclable, the ability to recycle a product depends upon the availability of a recycling system for that product in combination with a secondary market for the recycled materials. Recycle Right New York (https://recyclerightny.org/) provides information on what can and cannot be recycled in each municipality.

Composting is "the natural process of recycling organic matter, such as leaves and food scraps, into a valuable fertilizer that can enrich soil and plants."

Compostable in Industrial Facility items are designed to be composted under aerobic conditions in municipal and industrial aerobic composting facilities, where thermophilic conditions are achieved.

Compostable plastic is plastic that meets the American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM) D6400 standards.

Wax-lined products are paper and paperboard products that have been lined with wax, commonly paraffin wax, a petroleum derivative, to improve moisture resistance. Wax lining prevents these products from being recyclable or compostable.

Plastic-lined Products are paper and paperboard products that have been lined with a thin film of plastic to improve moisture resistance. The plastic lining prevents these products from being recyclable or compostable.

Appendix B: Sample guidelines:

1. Implement operational and behavioral changes to **eliminate** the use of disposable products;
2. Select disposable products that do not contain plastic to **replace** single use plastic products;
3. Select disposable products that are **BPI Certified compostable** to **replace** single use plastics. BPI Certified compostable products are considered single use plastics until the campus has established a composting program and is ensuring BPI Certified compostable products are being composted and managed in accordance with manufacturer and composting facility instructions;
4. Where plastic products are unavoidable, those made from recycled plastic are to be given preference;
5. Where an alternative to single use plastics is not yet available, an appropriate Material Recovery Facility is not available, or replacement is not practical, **exceptions** to this policy may be available;

a. Accessibility needs allow for an exception to all parts of the policy;

b. Other exceptions to this policy will be extremely limited. Exceptions should be reviewed at least annually for continued applicability; and

c. Additional exceptions may be necessary to support emergency operations, such as public health emergencies or extreme supply chain disruptions. This exception should only be used in the short term, institutions must return to following policy promptly when the emergency has ended.

Respectfully Submitted,

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