

Virginia Marine Debris Reduction Plan REPORT



Photo by Cat Volmer

2022 Public Perception Survey Plastic Pollution

Virginia's Voters Support Action

March-May 2022



PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS ABOUT PLASTIC POLLUTION: ABOUT THIS SURVEY

By **Laura McKay, Manager, Virginia Coastal Zone Management Program**
and **Katie Register, Executive Director, Clean Virginia Waterways.**

Reducing plastic pollution in our ocean, coastal waters, and on land is an urgent issue that will require a variety of actions, including public policies to address the more common and harmful sources. Plastics in the oceans are increasing at an alarming rate and having serious and sometimes lethal impacts on marine wildlife. We are also discovering plastic is making its way into the human body..

The 2021-2025 Virginia Marine Debris Reduction Plan (originally published in 2014, and updated in 2020-2021) has 60 Actions, one of which is to measure public support for new laws and policies that will reduce the sources of marine debris. The Virginia Coastal Zone Management Program, Clean Virginia Waterways, and the many partners of the Virginia Marine Debris Reduction Plan have demonstrated dedication to ALL strategies to reduce marine debris. These include: behavior modification; research and monitoring; proper disposal, interception and infrastructure; removal; and policy management, legislation and enforcement. This survey was targeted on one of these methods: public policies.

This opinion research explores the perceptions and attitudes of Virginia's voters about several leading problems, including plastic pollution. The goal is to understand public opinion on a suite of policies that have been adopted in other states to reduce litter and marine debris. These policies include:

- Deposits on beverage bottles and cans
- Requirements to decrease plastic packaging
- Shifting the costs of recycling from taxpayers to the producers of the plastic waste
- Laws to reduce the use of polystyrene, plastic bags, and other commonly littered items.

Data from this survey will assist in crafting successful behavior change campaigns as well as public policies. The findings, summarized in this report (and more fully explored in a full report) reveal that Virginia voters are deeply concerned about plastic pollution, and are ready to support policies to decrease plastic pollution, especially the plastic that ends up in the ocean.

RESEARCH METHODS

By **Steve Raabe, OpinionWorks**

OpinionWorks, in collaboration with the Virginia Coastal Zone Management Program and Clean Virginia Waterways of Longwood University, conducted a representative statewide sampling of 901 Virginia registered voters March 8-13, 2022. This survey sample has a potential error margin of ± 3.3 at the 95% confidence level. Voters were interviewed online and on wireless and landline telephones, ensuring we reached a broadly representative cross-section of voters. This survey represented all areas of the state and matched indicators for gender, race and ethnicity, and age in proportion to the composition of the registered voter population.

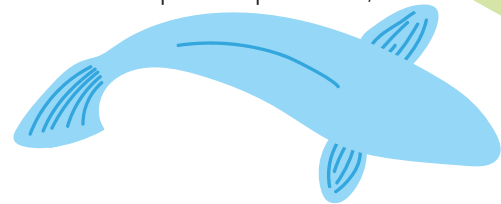
In addition, topics received further exploration through ten individual in-depth interviews conducted May 11-17. These guided, probing conversations between interviewer and respondent lasted about one hour, allowing for a deep and thorough understanding of key perceptions, motivations, reservations, and questions. While not representative of the electorate as a whole, these conversations provided insight into recurring themes and voter perceptions that an opinion poll on its own cannot provide. As you will see, conflicting or contradictory viewpoints are sometimes expressed by the people we surveyed. It is important to remember that even if the concerns contradict one another, they are still valid concerns from the viewpoint of those surveyed.

McKay, L., Register, K. and Raabe, S. May 2022. Plastic Pollution: Virginia's Voters Support Action: 2022 Public Perception Survey. Prepared for the Virginia Coastal Zone Management Program

Clean Virginia Waterways of Longwood University coordinated the survey as part of a grant from the Virginia Coastal Zone Management Program which is funded through Grant #NA21NOS4190152 of the U.S. Department of Commerce, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, under the Coastal Zone Management Act of 1972, as amended. The Virginia Coastal Zone Management Program is a network of state agencies and coastal localities. The Virginia Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) serves as the lead agency for the network.



The views expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Department of Commerce, NOAA or any of its subagencies, or Virginia DEQ.



Rankings of Top Concerns

*Voters were asked: "Do you consider each of the following to be a very serious problem, somewhat serious problem, not much of a problem, or not a problem at all?" This ranking is based on the percentage of voters who said the issues were "very serious".

1	Inflation and the cost of living	76%
2	Plastic floating in the ocean	55%
3	Plastics and toxins contaminating human food	47%
4	Chemicals and other toxins in the environment	44%
5	Loss of natural areas and animal habitat	42%
6	Climate change	42%
7	Lack of good-paying jobs	42%
8	The ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic	38%
9	Pollution sources located close to where people live	31%
10	Severe weather events	28%
11	Trash and litter in your community	24%

Key Findings

Do Virginia voters support public policies to prevent plastic pollution?

Yes, they do!

- Virginia voters are very concerned about plastic pollution, ranking it higher than climate change and the COVID pandemic.
- Here are some of the policy measures supported by Virginia voters to decrease plastic pollution:

Who Took The Survey

Gender

Male	49%
Female	50%

Age

Less than 25	7%
25 to 44	35%
45 to 64	33%
65 or older	19%

Race or Ethnicity

(alone or in combination)

White	69%
African-American or Black	21%
Asian	8%
Hispanic or Latino	5%
Others	5%

Political Party

Republican	32%
Democratic	33%
Independent/Other	30%

Political Philosophy

Conservative	29%
Moderate	39%
Progressive	27%

Community

Rural	20%
Small town	14%
Suburban	46%
Urban, or a city	20%

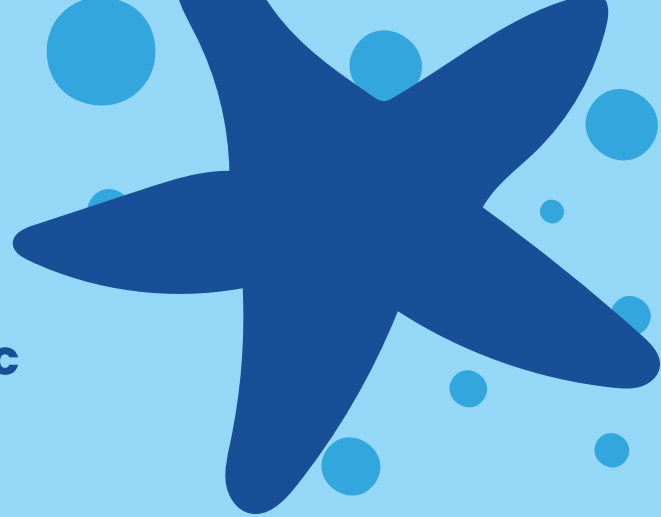
Percentages may not add to 100% because some people were not sure or preferred not to say.

POLICIES TO REDUCE PLASTIC POLLUTION	SUPPORTED BY VIRGINIA VOTERS
Require less plastic in packaging	76% of voters
Shift the costs of recycling programs off of community taxpayers and onto producers	71% of voters
Deposits on beverage bottles and cans	65% of voters
Cigarette litter fee	63% of voters
Ban single-use plastic grocery and shopping bags	63% of voters
Ban polystyrene food containers	61% of voters



**76%
SUPPORT**

**Require less plastic
in packaging**



**Manufacturers pay
for recycling**



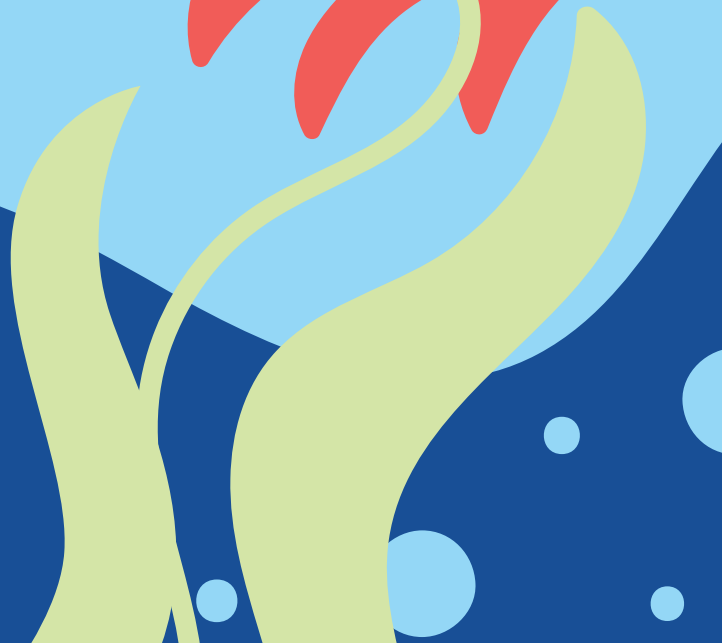
**71%
SUPPORT**



**65%
SUPPORT**

**Beverage
container deposits**

**People are more
supportive of this when
they learned they get
their deposits back.**



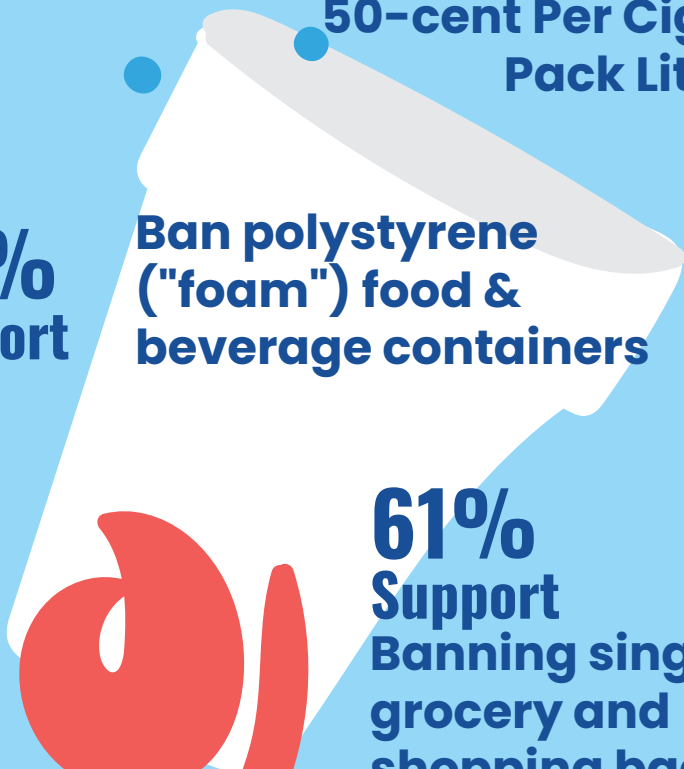


**50-cent Per Cigarette
Pack Litter Fee**

**64%
Support**

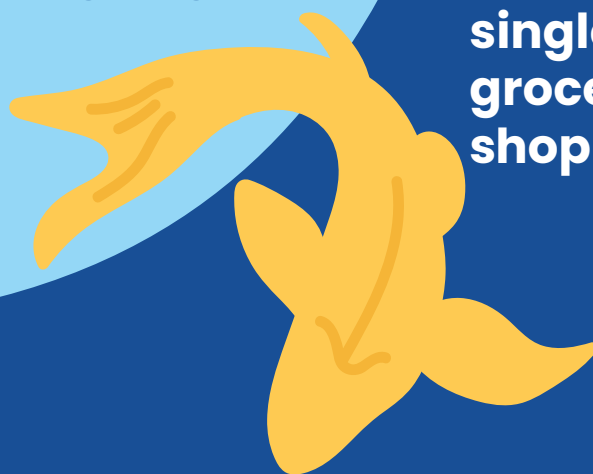
**63%
Support**

**Ban polystyrene
("foam") food &
beverage containers**



**61%
Support
Banning single-use
grocery and
shopping bags**

**48%
Support
5-cent fee on
single-use
grocery and
shopping bags**



Actual survey questions: "Some types of plastics are very likely to end up as litter and can be harmful to wildlife, or they are hard to recycle. People have proposed some policies that would reduce the amount of plastic that ends up in our environment and the ocean. For each idea, please say if you strongly favor it, somewhat favor it, are neutral, somewhat oppose it, or strongly oppose it."

1. Ban single-use plastic grocery and shopping bags and require paper or reusable bags instead.
2. Place a 5-cent fee on single-use plastic bags to discourage their use.
3. Ban polystyrene or foam take-out containers.
4. Charge a 5-cent or 10-cent fee on bottled drinks that you get back when you return the bottles to a store or redemption center.
5. Charge a 50-cent-fee on each pack of cigarettes to help pay the cost of cleaning up littered cigarette butts.
6. Require manufacturers to use less plastic in product packaging.
7. Require manufacturers to help pay for recycling pick-up and processing in local communities, reducing burden on taxpayers.

VIRGINIANS: WILLING TO TAKE PERSONAL ACTION TO DECREASE PLASTIC POLLUTION

In addition to supporting public policies to reduce plastic pollution, Virginia's voters expressed a broad willingness to take personal actions in their daily lives to lessen the plastic pollution problem. Virginians are willing to...

Use reusable bags instead of single-use plastic bags at the store.	84%
Use a refillable water bottle or drink filtered tap water instead of buying disposable plastic water bottles.	83%
Pick up litter when they see it.	80%
Stop using plastic straws.	65%
Stop using all single-use plastic items for a month.	64%



Taylor, Fairfax, VA, talking about how most marine debris comes from inland sources:

"I didn't know that 80% (of the plastic in the ocean) comes from inland. And so I think understanding that basically the litter in our community is what makes up the litter in the ocean is a huge game changer."

Patricia, Reston, VA, talking about fees and bans on plastic bags:

"I think it's about time and it's not hard to bring your own bag."



Voters were asked to share “..one word that describes how you feel when you see litter on the ground”.



Carol, Williamsburg, VA, talking about plastic pollution in water:

“It’s very disturbing. I am concerned about...plastic pollution in the water and elsewhere because it affects all the fish and wildlife and people. It’s not good, and it’s something that we really need to get a handle on, because it’s gotten to the critical point right now.”

Henry, James City County, VA speaking about banning polystyrene:

“This would’ve been great legislation back in 1990. I support it because there are so many alternatives out there. There are so many things that are compostable, there are so many things that are easily recyclable. I have no clue why places are still using Styrofoam.”

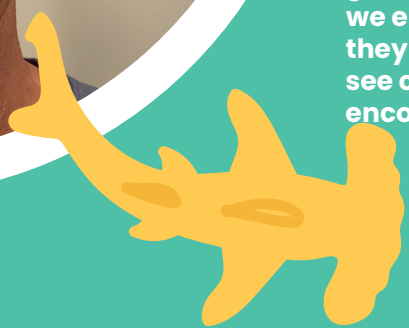




Overall, voters in this study expressed strong support for public polices to reduce plastic pollution everywhere – in our food, our ocean and our environment.

Michael, Hampton, VA, talking about extended producer responsibility:

“It’s time for (producers) to pay, because (they) need to be involved also. You’re producing all these things. You need to understand the necessity of making sure things get recycled...and as a taxpayer, I think it’s about time we enforce some of these things for these producers so they can start picking up the slack...so for me, when I see companies and organizations making an effort, that encourages me to make an effort also.”



Monique, Roanoke, VA, speaking about plastic pollution:

“It really kind of makes me sad that people won’t take care of the Earth, and they’ll just discard trash, not thinking anything about how it affects the ecosystem that we live in... it makes me wonder, why is this happening? Why hasn’t anybody done something to help stop this, or reduce this?”



Clean Virginia Waterways (CVW) of Longwood University is a statewide organization dedicated to decreasing litter and marine debris through research, cleanup events, and building collaborations. Since 1995, more than 120,000 volunteers have removed more than 5 million pounds of debris from Virginia’s rivers and beaches during CVW’s annual cleanups that are held in September and October. CVW is funded through grants, gifts, sponsorships, and workshop fees.

The **Virginia Coastal Zone Management (CZM)** Program is a network of state agencies and coastal localities that implements the enforceable laws, regulations and policies that protect our coastal resources and foster sustainable development across Virginia’s coastal zone. DEQ serves as the lead agency for the network. To accomplish its goals, the Virginia CZM Program administers an annual grant award of approximately \$3 million from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), National Ocean Service, Office for Coastal Management, through the federal Coastal Zone Management Act of 1972, as amended.

OpinionWorks, based in Maryland, conducts frequent opinion studies at the state and local level across the country. Since 2007, it has been the polling organization for The Baltimore Sun newspaper and has polled for numerous other media, institutions of higher education, and public interest advocates throughout the Mid-Atlantic region and beyond. They are engaged by state and local government agencies from Delaware to Oregon to assess public needs and preferences. They study human decision-making to inform behavior change efforts to help restore the Chesapeake Bay and encourage habits like recycling.



Virginia Coastal Zone
MANAGEMENT PROGRAM



A Program of Longwood University

The full report from the Spring 2022 Virginia Survey on Plastic Pollution by the Virginia Coastal Zone Management Program, Clean Virginia Waterways, and OpinionWorks will be found on the following websites:

CZM web address: <https://www.deq.virginia.gov/coasts/marine-debris>

CVW web address: <http://www.longwood.edu/cleanva/publications.html>