

Blumenthal calls on feds to stop buying single-use plastics



U.S. Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., holds up a polyester shirt Friday, Aug. 18, 2023, while talking about the concerns of microplastics in waterways during a news conference on the Custom House Pier at New London Waterfront Park. Charles Rothenberger, center, a climate and energy attorney for Save the Sound, and New London Mayor Michael Passero listen in the background. (Dana Jensen/The Day) Buy Photo Reprints



Anne Hulick, Connecticut director of Clean Water Action, talks Friday, Aug. 18, 2023, about microplastics in waterways while U.S. Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., left, and Charles Rothenberger, right, a climate and energy attorney for Save the Sound, listen in the background during a news conference held on the Custom House Pier at New London Waterfront Park. (Dana Jensen/The Day)

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Charles Rothenberger, third from right, a climate and energy attorney for Save the Sound, talks Friday, Aug. 18, 2023, about microplastics in waterways. From left, Anne Hulick, Connecticut director of Clean Water Action, City Council member Reona Dyess, U.S. Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., New London Mayor Michael Passero and state Rep. Anthony Nolan, D-New London, look on during a news conference held on the Custom House Pier at New London Waterfront Park. (Dana Jensen/The Day) Buy Photo Reprints

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August 18, 2023 6:02 pm • Last Updated: August 19, 2023 4:45 pm

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New London — U.S. Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., on Friday called for the federal government to phase out the purchase of single-use plastic items, like bottles, straws, wrappers and take-out containers, and microplastics.

“Microplastics are a macro problem,” he said from the Custom House Pier on the Thames River.

Microplastics are pieces less than 5 millimeters in diameter that make their way into waterways. They come from sources including single-use plastics, synthetic fabrics, car tires, road-marking paints, microbeads in cosmetic products and sanitary wipes, that break down into smaller pieces.

Blumenthal is among numerous lawmakers, including U.S Rep. Rosa DeLauro, D-3rd District, to sign onto a letter from U.S. Rep. Lloyd Doggett, D-Texas, and U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley, D-Ore., calling on the Environmental Protection Agency to strengthen its policy against single-use plastics.

He said the amount of plastics production in the last 20 years has doubled, citing data from the intergovernmental Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

“That trend is continuing, and it spells trouble for our environment,” he said.

He called for the federal government to “set an example” when it comes to purchasing the single-use items, many of which he said are used on military bases.

The lawmakers in the letter told EPA Administrator Michael S. Regan that the national strategy on preventing plastic pollution, which is currently in draft form, doesn't go far enough because it calls for a plan to reduce federal procurement of the single-use plastics instead of eliminating it.

The EPA is currently reviewing comments from the public before finalizing its recommendations.

The draft report said the single-use items make their way through litter or illegal dumping into waterways and oceans, where they shed microplastics.

The draft report cited research from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine that says microplastics can pose serious threats to wildlife and may potentially harm humans.

Anne Hulick, state director of Clean Water Action, said the national organization began in 1972 to fight for passage of the Clean Water Act. It became law in October of that year after Congress overrode a veto by President Richard M. Nixon.

“At that time, you could see the pollution,” she said. “You could see things were dumped in our rivers and oceans. The rivers were catching on fire.”

Now, she said, the problem of the tiny plastics is “more insidious.”

Charles Rothenberger, the climate and energy attorney for the nonprofit advocacy group Save the Sound, used the word “pernicious” to describe the threat.

“These microplastics are appearing throughout ecosystems in a wide variety of fish and shellfish that all of us consume,” he said. “And although the Clean Water Act has made great progress in cleaning our waters to make them truly swimmable and fishable, we have to deploy it against today’s new and emerging threat.”

The EPA’s draft report acknowledged “significant knowledge gaps” about the impact of microplastics and called for more research.

On the pier looking out over the river that flows into the Long Island Sound, state Rep. Anthony Nolan, D-New London, appealed to people to think about the damage that can come from items of convenience like plastic straws and takeout containers if they end up in the water.

“Try to change your lifestyle,” he said.

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