

October 13, 2021

Anderson House Office Building
124 North Capitol Avenue
Lansing, MI 48933

Dear Representative Howell and the Natural Resources and Outdoor Recreational Committee:

My name is Lara O'Brien and I am a recent graduate of the University of Michigan's School for Environment and Sustainability. I am also the creator of the Balloon Debris Survey (balloondebris.org), a citizen science project aimed at mapping balloon litter to help raise awareness about plastic pollution in the Great Lakes and beyond. I am writing to express my strong support for House Bill 5373 to ban the intentional release of lighter-than-air balloons in Michigan.

Lighter-than-air balloons can travel hundreds, even thousands of miles, before landing as litter on beaches, lakes, forests, and other natural areas. Balloons, both Mylar and latex, are single-use plastics. While latex balloons are falsely marketed as '100% biodegradable', they are made with plasticizers and other chemical additives that hinder the biodegradation process. Mylar or foil balloons, made of thin sheets of polyester film with a metallic coating, will never biodegrade, remaining in the environment forever. Since Mylar balloons conduct electricity, they are also responsible for thousands of power outages every year and can spark severe wildfires when they come into contact with power lines.

Balloons pose a significant threat to wildlife, livestock, and pets that can be injured or killed from ingesting balloon fragments, getting entangled in the long ribbons or strings, or being spooked by the falling debris. A recent study from the University of Tasmania found that balloons are the deadliest form of marine debris for seabirds, as balloons are 32 times more likely to kill than hard plastics when ingested. The Ocean Conservancy has ranked balloons as the third deadliest form of ocean trash for marine life, just behind discarded fishing gear and plastic bags and utensils, due to the high risk of entanglement and death. Balloon litter is also a serious issue for the farming and ranching community as livestock can be severely injured or killed by balloons blown into fields and paddocks. Balloons can also be caught up by combines, balers, tractors, and other machinery, damaging equipment and contaminating crops and hay.

Between 2016 and 2018, volunteers with the Alliance for the Great Lakes picked up and recorded more than 18,000 pieces of balloon debris. In 2019, the International Coastal Cleanup, an annual event organized by the Ocean Conservancy, recorded over 104,150 balloons found around the world, with almost half in the United States. Since I began the Balloon Debris Survey in 2019, thousands of balloons have been reported all over Michigan and the Great Lakes, including the remote Isle Royale National Park, Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore, and the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge. Balloons have been found in forests, on farms, littering beaches, lakes, and in every possible environment.

In addition, a ban on intentional balloon releases will reduce the amount of helium used for this purpose. Essential for scientific research, electronics, and life-saving medical tests like MRI scans, helium is a finite resource that is quickly being depleted. Passing this legislation would help preserve this vital

resource, protect the environment and wildlife, reduce the amount of plastic pollution entering the Great Lakes every year, and would serve as a positive example for the rest of the nation and the world.

In order to protect the environment and wildlife, more cities and states are passing laws to prohibit the intentional release of balloons, including California, Connecticut, Florida, Tennessee, Virginia, Maryland, and Hawaii. Other states are introducing similar legislation, including the Illinois House Bill 418, which was introduced earlier this year and is awaiting a Senate vote. It is time Michigan passed a similar law.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

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