

Good morning Senator Brenner, Representative Tucker, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Environment and Natural Resources. My name is Rebecca Boulos. I am a resident of South Portland and here today in support of the **LD 618: [An Act Regarding the Outdoor Release or Abandonment of Balloons](#)** & **LD 1023: [An Act To Define Intentional Balloon Releases as Litter](#)**.

About two years ago, my fiancé and I saw a documentary at Maine Audubon, “[Rubber Jellyfish](#),” which opened our eyes to the serious problem mass balloon releases cause for the environment and wildlife – on land and in the ocean. The film asks a thought-provoking question, “We all know that throwing rubbish on the ground is littering, so why is letting a balloon float away seen as something different?”

When released balloons eventually pop, they shrivel and fall back to earth. Plastic pollution is one of today’s biggest environmental challenges. Microplastics have been found in our drinking water, food and even the air we breathe.<sup>1</sup> While many people are trying to reduce their use of single-use plastic bags, bottles, utensils and straws, balloons are often overlooked. When they eventually land in the ocean, they move like a jellyfish – hence, the name of the documentary, “rubber jellyfish” – and are then eaten by ocean wildlife, including by sea turtles, an endangered species.

Quick Facts from the film:

- 6 of 7 sea turtle species worldwide are endangered according to the IUCN Red List.
- In a 2012 study from the University of Queensland, balloons were identified as being disproportionately consumed by sea turtles based on commonality of balloons as litter on Queensland beaches. In other words, the study found that sea turtles specifically target balloons. In fact, of all rubber items found inside of deceased sea turtles, 78% were balloons or balloon fragments. They concluded that sea turtles were consuming balloons to such a large degree due to their similarity in appearance to jellyfish which is a prey all sea turtles eat – [click here for the scientific paper](#).
- When helium balloons are released, many burst into jellyfish-like shapes, high in the Earth’s atmosphere (see [film’s trailer](#) for a visual explanation).
- Sea turtles do not have the ability to throw up so ingestion of human garbage is particularly problematic for them.
- Ingestion of balloons and plastic can cause ‘float syndrome’ in sea turtles – a painful and often lethal condition where gasses form in the digestive tract around the consumed garbage. This causes the animal to float, making them vulnerable to boat strike, shark predation, accumulation of barnacles, sunburn, and unable to dive down for food or protection. Many ultimately die a slow death by starvation.
- Balloons also cause choking and entanglement deaths in species other than sea turtles. Affected taxa include numerous [sea bird species, birds of prey, whales, bighorn sheep, horses, lambs, seals, and platypuses](#).
- In most parts of the world balloon release ceremonies are legal. They are a popular way of memorializing lost loved ones.
- Since the late 1980s, latex balloons have been falsely labeled as “100% biodegradable and environmentally friendly,” which has contributed to the popularity of balloon release ceremonies.

- According to the [US Consumer Protection Agency](#), “of all children’s products, balloons are the leading cause of suffocation death.”
- Helium inhalation also has the potential to result in death. Even the helium industry warns consumers about [the dangers of their product](#).

In the film, Clemson University was featured as an example institution that has changed its practices. *For more than 35 years, for every home football game, the university would release tens of thousands of balloons.* In 2017, administrators stopped the practice, under ongoing pressure from students, faculty, staff, and advocates.

According to a 2019 *Forbes* [article](#):

- Roughly 20-29% of the public participates in events that release helium balloons.
- Most balloon releases happen in suburban or rural areas and there is often assumption that distance from the ocean reduces harm to marine life. ([According to a NOAA website](#), “In 1998, a balloon released at the Olympics in Nagano, Japan, landed in Los Angeles just 49 hours later, a distance of approximately 5,300 miles.”)

I am supportive of efforts to regulate mass balloon releases. There is really no reason that balloon pollution shouldn’t be regulated like other pollution, especially given the documented threats it poses to animal, human and environmental health.

Thank you to Representatives Blume and McDonald for introducing bills to address this ecological problem.

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<sup>1</sup> Consumer Reports. You’re literally eating microplastics. How you can cut down exposure to them. October 7, 2019. *Washington Post*. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/youre-literally-eating-microplastics-how-you-can-cut-down-exposure-to-them/2019/10/04/22ebdfb6-e17a-11e9-8dc8-498eabc129a0\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/youre-literally-eating-microplastics-how-you-can-cut-down-exposure-to-them/2019/10/04/22ebdfb6-e17a-11e9-8dc8-498eabc129a0_story.html).