March 29, 2021

Chair Brenner, Chair Tucker, and Distinguished Members of the Environment and Natural Resources Committee:

The Surfrider Foundation is a nonprofit environmental organization dedicated to the protection and enjoyment of the world's ocean, waves, and beaches for all people through conservation, activism, research and education. Our Maine Chapter volunteers are beachgoers, surfers, kayakers and the like who are united by a desire to take action to protect the ocean. We are active across several coastal issue areas, including protecting public beach access, protecting clean water, mitigating plastic marine debris, advocating for improved water quality, increasing ocean protections and advancing smart coastal preservation, climate change preparedness and adaptation strategies.

The Surfrider Foundation Maine Chapter offers this testimony in support of LD618,[1] an act regarding the outdoor release or abandonment of balloons, and LD1023,[2] an act to define intentional balloon releases as littering.

Per LD618; we appreciate that this bill is presented in the form that it passed out of the Environment and Natural Resources Committee in the last session where similar legislation was considered.

The definition of 'balloon' presented in LD1023 would strengthen LD618, and we suggest that if the language in this bill's Section Sec. 3. 17 MRSA §2263-A, sub-§1(1), Prohibited Acts is carried over into a combined draft, that the additive framing of "release" be modified to "intentionally release or abandon" to clarify the intents of the legislation.

While balloon enthusiasts assert that releasing balloons that are handtied and constructed out of so-called "biodegradable" latex without any attachments of ribbon are environmentally friendly, unfortunately, facts prove that this is untrue.

Natural latex *can* be biodegradable under exacting conditions on its own, but after adding the necessary chemicals, plasticizers and artificial dyes required for balloon production, the natural degrading process is intentionally retarded by several years,

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[1] http://www.mainelegislature.org/legis/bills/getPDF.asp?paper=HP0454&item=1&snum=130
[2] http://www.mainelegislature.org/legis/bills/getPDF.asp?paper=HP0761&item=1&snum=130

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leaving behind toxic chemicals in its wake.[3] This fact is further evidenced by sewage treatment plant operators reporting that latex is one of several problem materials that are not affected by the biological treatment system.

The balloon industry says that latex balloons are safe to release - claiming they rise to a height of 5 miles and burst into minuscule pieces that are harmless in the environment.

Balloons Blow... Don't Let Them Go!

Fact is, every released balloon behaves differently. All latex balloons fall to earth as ugly litter. Some land completely intact, others burst - all can resemble an enticing meal to any animal, whether it falls on land or in the sea.

BalloonsBlow.org

Even if we could improve degradability, this would do nothing to safeguard wildlife and marine species from the immediate threats of entanglement, ingestion and suffocation presented by littered balloons and balloon accessories, such as strings.

Another false factual claim is that so-called "biodegradable" latex balloons take the same amount of time to decompose as an oak leaf does. This is very misleading; oak leaves are of course naturally occurring and durable, and can take four years to decompose while posing no threats to the ecosystem or wildlife, and in fact providing benefits. While oak leaves are natural and belong in Maine's ecosystem, the same is not true for balloons, which pose immediate threats to wildlife and the environment when littered. Many animals mistake burst balloons as food, causing intestinal blockage and death. The ribbons or string that are sometimes tied to balloons, biodegradable or not, will last years and can also entangle and therefore immediately endanger any animal that comes in contact with them.

The pictures below are the hard proof; take a look through the photos in Exhibit A, assembled by the nonprofit organization Balloons Blow. These photos paint the real picture and the unbiased truth about littered balloons. Each balloon is photographed exactly as it is found for documentation of its condition and location, before it is collected. And balloons are not only found littered in every stretch of our environment, they are also pulled from necropsies and found entangling dead wildlife.

Fortunately, alternatives exist for businesses that currently profit off from balloon release ceremonies to diversify their operations and maintain profits in ways that do not harm our shared environment. From reusable flags, banners, streamers and dancing inflatables or ribbons to lighting candles, blowing bubbles, garden plantings, paddle

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[3] https://www.nytimes.com/1990/04/01/nyregion/l-balloons-effect-on-the-environment-867890.html

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outs, pinwheels and garden spinners; there are many ways to commemorate special events and conduct honorary ceremonies that can still turn significant profit while not harming and killing wildlife or polluting our environment the way that balloon release ceremonies do. Additionally, banning the intentional release or abandonment of balloons would not prohibit balloon use or sale, but would instead prohibit this intentional littering.

As more correlative data connects balloon releases to significant negative impacts to wildlife and marine species, more and more Maine towns are deliberating local regulation to ban or mitigate intentional balloon release. From Kennebunk to Unity, Mainers are paying attention and asking for action at the state or federal level.

Many states have already banned or mitigated the intentional release of balloons and sky lanterns, including California, Connecticut, Tennessee and Virginia. It is time for Maine to step up and protect our environment from this needless pollution.

Thank you for your consideration of an Ought to Pass vote making it illegal to intentionally release or abandon balloons in Maine.

Sincerely,

Melissa Gates
Northeast Regional Manager
Surfrider Foundation
Pronouns: she/her/hers[4]

EXHIBIT A. Photos of littered balloons collected by Balloons Blow.

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[4] FMI: https://www.mypronouns.org/

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Latex Balloon

Latex Balloon

Latex Balloon

Latex Balloon

Latex Balloon

Latex "Squid"

Shredded latex balloon

Blue "jelly" balloon

Latex Balloon

Pink jelly (with nibbles)

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