

Impact of Plastic Foam Bans on Pollution



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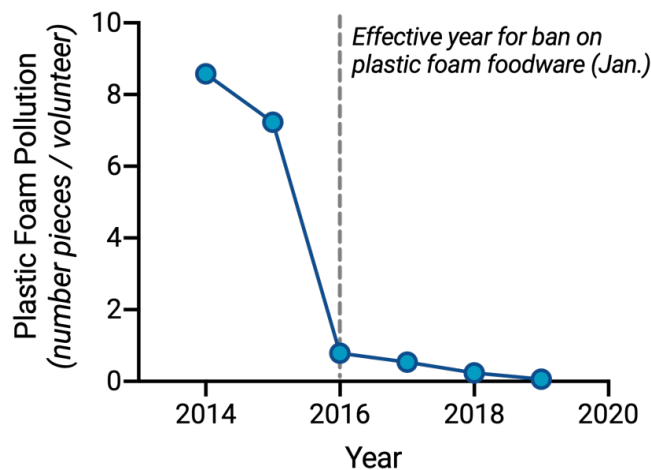
Background

Plastic foam is an environmental menace. Taken together, plastic foam foodware including cups, plates and takeout containers are in the top ten most common types of plastic littering our beaches, totaling more than 8.7 million collected since 1986—and this doesn't even include the small pieces that plastic foam notoriously breaks up into.

As of September 2023, eleven states and Washington D.C. have passed bans to tackle this harmful material. To help determine the impacts of these bans on plastic foam, we used data from Ocean Conservancy's annual International Coastal Cleanup to track plastic foam pollution on beaches and waterways. For the analysis below, we measured the number of plastic foam items collected and normalized to the number of volunteers participating to get to a final metric of number of foam items collected per volunteer before and after foam bans were passed. We used Washington, D.C. and Maryland as case studies as two of the first regions to pass foam bans (and have these laws become effective).

Washington D.C. Case Study

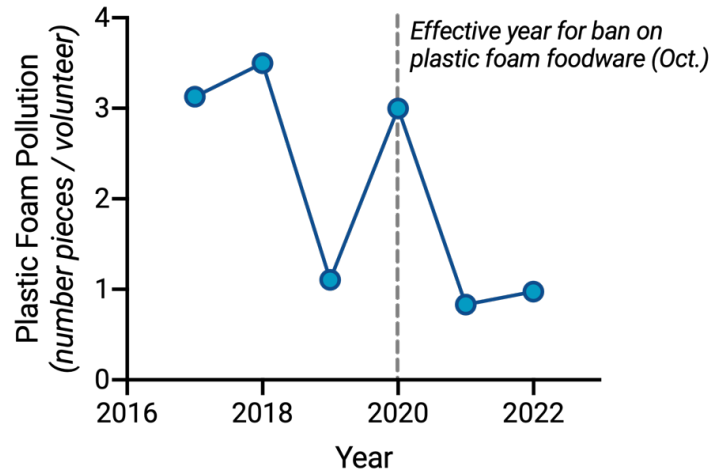
Washington D.C. passed an ordinance banning plastic foam foodware in 2014. The new ordinance went into effect at the beginning of 2016.



- Based on ICC data, we found a 95% decrease in plastic foam foodware pollution following the ban on plastic foam foodware going into effect.

Maryland Case Study

Maryland passed a law banning plastic foam foodware in 2019, which went into effect in October of 2020. Given that the ban went into effect towards the end of the year, for the purposes of this analysis, most of the data collected in 2020 are considered pre-ban (especially as the International Coastal Cleanup Day, the day with the most data collection, takes place in September).



- Based on ICC data, we found a 65% decrease in plastic foam foodware pollution in beaches and waterways following the ban on plastic foam foodware going into effect.

The Impact

While it's too early to tell in most states that have passed bans on plastic foam food ware (or they haven't gone into effect yet), analysis from these two case studies show that bans on plastic foam foodware lead to a significant reduction in pollution in the surrounding environment.

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