Illinois PIRG

2019 PROGRAM REPORT
Finding common ground and making real progress

Dear Illinois PIRG member,

Sometimes people ask if it’s frustrating to be involved in political advocacy right now.

Sure, we’ve seen the divisions in our country deepen in recent years, and we’ve watched them harden in Washington, D.C., in ways that make positive action on issues that affect Americans’ lives nearly impossible. That’s frustrating.

But from the beginning, the approach of Illinois PIRG and our partner groups across the country has been to make progress wherever we can, whenever we can, as best we can—even when things are gridlocked in D.C. That’s as true today as it was in 1971, when PIRG began.

Over the last few years, our national network has focused our energy at the state and local levels, winning changes that are documented in these pages.

For example, our Ban Roundup campaign continued to call for bans on glyphosate-based weed killers, such as Monsanto’s Roundup, unless or until they are proven safe. In 2019, even more cities across the U.S. added their names to the list of municipalities that have banned or restricted glyphosate-based herbicides.

As we work to improve air quality and cut down on climate emissions, our Transform Transportation campaign is winning support for public transit, electric buses, electric cars and other clean, healthy alternatives to wasting billions on new or expanded highways.

To protect consumers, our PIRG Consumer Watchdog team continued to search out the hidden dangers in our homes, in the marketplace and at the grocery store. In 2019, U.S. PIRG Education Fund alerted the public to major food and product recalls, and sounded the alarm about unsafe inclined infant sleepers still in use at day cares.

Our leaders in Washington should be doing much more on these and other issues. But we don’t have time to brood about their failures. There are too many opportunities elsewhere to make progress for our health, our safety and the quality of our lives.

Thanks to you, our staff and other supporters are seizing every opportunity we can to win positive results for the public.

Abe Scarr
State Director, Illinois PIRG

P.S. Our staff quickly shifted to working remotely as the COVID-19 crisis swept the United States. But rest assured, we have continued our work to advocate for you and for a healthier, safer world.
Reining in the Peoples Gas pipe replacement program

It’s no secret that some of Chicago’s old gas mains are prone to leaking or breaking, and need to be replaced to protect public safety. But Peoples Gas is failing to prioritize the most at-risk pipes. Instead, it’s upgrading its entire system, overspending its budget, and passing on the cost to consumers. That’s why Illinois PIRG is calling on state decision-makers to rein in Peoples Gas.

Peoples Gas plan to replace pipes passes costs to consumers, leaves too many at risk

Last year, Chicago home heating customers were already paying an average of $75 per year to replace gas pipes in the city. A 2019 report finds they could be paying 10 times that by 2040.

In addition to costs running rampant, the Peoples Gas replacement program is failing to put the most at-risk pipes first. The “Tragedy of Errors” report, authored by our research partner Illinois PIRG Education Fund, revealed that gas leaks haven’t declined in proportion to the billions spent on the multi-decade replacement project.

“Peoples Gas is failing to prioritize public safety with its poorly executed pipe replacement program,” said Illinois PIRG Education Fund Director and report co-author Abe Scarr. “Instead, it is overhauling its entire system, busting its budget, and leaving customers with the bill.”

Illinois PIRG joined AARP Illinois, CUB Illinois, and Community Organizing and Family Issues to call for action to protect Chicago gas customers.

Year-end report shows Peoples Gas continues to mismanage pipe replacement program

The Peoples Gas pipe replacement program continued to fall behind schedule and over budget in 2019, according to its own year-end report.

Its fourth quarter report, released Feb. 18, 2020, encapsulated how the program’s spending contributed to soaring Chicago gas prices. As 2019 closed, Chicagoleans were $59.6 million behind on their heating bills—compared to 38.5 million at the same time the year before.

Over the course of last year, Peoples Gas has sent more than 300,000 disconnection notices. Meanwhile, its replacement program has run behind schedule and over budget for eight consecutive quarters.

“For a project spanning decades, falling behind schedule or going over budget any one quarter or year is not necessarily a sign of failure,” said Abe. “But doing so every quarter is.”
26 million pounds of glyphosate are sprayed on school grounds, parks and gardens in the United States every year.

More than 47,000 people signed our petition to ban Roundup and other glyphosate-based products in states across the country last summer.

Working to ban Roundup

Since the World Health Organization labeled glyphosate, the main ingredient in Roundup, a probable human carcinogen, we’ve been warning the public and working to ban Roundup unless and until it can be proven safe.

In 2019, two more juries ruled that there was enough evidence to hold Roundup culpable for causing the cancers of three plaintiffs, making that three guilty verdicts since August 2018. More than 42,700 farmers, landscapers, home gardeners and others filed lawsuits claiming Roundup’s makers knew of its cancer risk but failed to warn consumers. And the list of U.S. cities that have banned or restricted glyphosate-based herbicides continues to grow. But Roundup is still putting our health at risk, and more needs to be done.

Public education, member action strengthen call to ban Roundup

The more we educate the public about Monsanto’s weed killer Roundup and other glyphosate-based products, the more support we find for banning them—the residue of which can be found practically everywhere.

In July 2019, Illinois PIRG and our national network kicked off a summer public education drive in 15 states.

“We’re doing all we can to get the facts to legislators about why we should ban Roundup until and unless it’s proven safe,” said Kara Cook-Schultz, director of our national network’s Ban Roundup campaign. “The support and action of our members are making it easier to get local decision-makers to listen.”

Over the course of the summer, our canvassers enlisted more than 47,000 citizens nationwide to join our call for state leaders to ban Roundup and other glyphosate-based products.

Studies find weed killer in beer and wine

The last thing you want to think about when you pour yourself a glass of wine or a cold beer is whether it contains even small amounts of a potentially carcinogenic weed killer.

But the use of glyphosate, the main ingredient in Monsanto’s Roundup, is now so widespread that the chemical is found virtually everywhere—including, as a Feb. 22, 2019, report from our research partners at U.S. PIRG Education Fund found, in 19 of the 20 beer and wine products tested.

“No matter the efforts of brewers and vintners, [U.S. PIRG Education Fund] found that it is incredibly difficult to avoid ... that consumers will likely drink glyphosate at every happy hour and backyard barbecue around the country,” Kara told USA Today.

Illinois PIRG and our national network are calling on federal, state and local officials to ban the use of glyphosate. We’ll drink to that.
Transforming our transportation system

For our health, our safety and our children’s future, we need to make our transportation systems cleaner and more efficient. That’s why, in 2019, we launched our Transform Transportation campaign to reduce the need to drive and to electrify buses and cars—because we believe the easiest, cheapest and most pleasant ways to travel should also be the cleanest and healthiest.

Illinois taxpayers, commuters dodged $4 billion boondoggle after officials declared Tri-State Tollway expansion project ‘effectively dead’

Illinois hit the brakes on an expansion of the Tri-State Tollway last year—and that’s good news for taxpayers and commuters.

State Rep. Sam Yingling called the project “effectively dead” after officials announced July 12, 2019, that they would give up their efforts to expand the tollway to five—and in some places six—lanes in each direction. As Illinois PIRG Education Fund warned in “Highway Boondoggles 5,” the $4 billion project would fail to relieve traffic, just as two previous projects had.

“Without a comprehensive plan, you can’t build your way out of congestion,” said Abe Scarr, director of Illinois PIRG Education Fund. “By canceling the wasteful tollway expansion, we have an opportunity to instead build a 21st-century transportation system with less pollution, less gridlock and more public transit options.”

Our national network has profiled 50 wasteful highway projects over five editions of our “Highway Boondoggles” report. Including the Tri-State Tollway, we’ve now helped stop eight while saving states billions of dollars.

We backed a bill that could keep school buses from harming kids’ health.

On the way to and from school every day, more than 25 million children breathe air polluted by the yellow buses that take them there.

Diesel pollution stunts the growth of kids’ lungs and worsens asthma symptoms, and has also been linked to poorer academic performance. That’s why, on June 6, 2019, seven U.S. senators introduced the Clean School Bus Act, which would commit $1 billion over five years to help school districts transition to all-electric buses.

“Our kids shouldn’t have to breathe dirty, dangerous air just to get to school,” said our national network’s Transform Transportation campaign director, Matt Casale. “We applaud and endorse this proposal because it will help protect the health of America’s children.”

The now-canceled $4 billion Tri-State Tollway widening project was featured in Illinois PIRG Education Fund’s “Highway Boondoggles 5” report.

Replacing all of America’s school and transit buses with electric buses could avoid an average of 7.3 million tons of greenhouse gas emissions each year.
Stopping the overuse of antibiotics

The idea that our antibiotics might no longer work in the near future is alarming. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimate that at least 35,000 Americans die every year from drug-resistant infections—that’s one person dying every 15 minutes. Other researchers suggest the number of deaths could be nearly five times as many. It’s clear that we need to take urgent action to stop the overuse of antibiotics and keep our life-saving medicines working when we need them.

Illinois PIRG and our national network have been hard at work for the last five years to preserve the effectiveness of antibiotics, building a network of leading health professional advocates, and convincing the country’s biggest restaurant chains to stop serving meat raised on the routine use of antibiotics. Here’s some of the ongoing work you’ve helped make possible in 2019.

45,000 tell the EPA: Don’t let growers spray antibiotics on citrus trees
Antibiotic overuse is becoming a global health crisis, threatening to make life-saving medicines ineffective. Yet the Trump administration is moving to allow growers to spray 650,000 pounds annually of these life-saving medicines on citrus trees.

On March 13, 2019, advocates from the research and policy arm of our national network, U.S. PIRG Education Fund, delivered signatures from more than 45,000 people asking the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to deny the proposal.

“The more you use antibiotics, the greater the risk that bacteria resistant to the drugs will flourish and spread. The bottom line is that the potential problems created by spraying massive amounts of strepto-
mycin on citrus fields could outweigh the original problem the EPA wants to solve,” said Matt Wellington, who directs U.S. PIRG Education Fund’s Stop the Overuse of Antibiotics campaign.

Spraying antibiotics on citrus fields is supposed to combat citrus greening, but it won’t cure or prevent the spread of the disease. On top of that, the EPA has clearly not fully considered the consequences of this unprecedented antibiotic use.

**We launched a campaign calling on Wendy’s to ‘Hold the Antibiotics’ from its beef supply chain**

How can the country’s third-largest burger chain help save the cornerstone of modern medicine? By buying only beef raised without the routine use of antibiotics.

On March 28, 2019, Illinois PIRG and our national network launched our campaign to convince Wendy’s to do just that. The CDC now estimates that 35,000 Americans die each year due to antibiotic-resistant infections. Large meat buyers such as Wendy’s can help keep our antibiotics effective by only sourcing beef from livestock farms that don’t overuse our medically important antibiotics.

“We can’t waste life-saving medicines to produce cheap beef. Wendy’s can use its buying power to help move the beef industry away from overusing antibiotics,” said Matt, who directs our national network’s Hold the Antibiotics: Wendy’s campaign.

Wendy’s no longer serves chicken raised on medically important antibiotics. But the chain earned only a D- on the 2019 Chain Reaction scorecard authored by our research partner U.S. PIRG Education Fund, which graded top burger chains on antibiotics use in their beef supply chains.

**Superbugs Unplugged: U.S. PIRG launched a podcast about antibiotic resistance**

Get ready for some alarming stories—which are all the more alarming because they’re true.

On Nov. 14, 2019, our partner U.S. PIRG and the Antibiotic Resistance Action Center (ARAC) of George Washington University launched “Superbugs Unplugged,” a podcast that will dive into the alarming issue of rising antibiotic resistance. Matt co-hosts the podcast with Dr. Lance Price of ARAC.

“It’s just] totally baffling to me [that] we treat these drugs, not as the life-saving medicines that they are, but as tools in agriculture and wherever else we’re using them,” said Matt in the podcast’s inaugural episode. “I’m really excited for this podcast ... to be a forum for how we address this problem comprehensively.”

The approach of an era when, because of overuse, our antibiotics might no longer work, and what used to be common, treatable infections may become deadly, is truly terrifying. Our podcast will educate the public and promote solutions to avoid this nightmare scenario.
PIRG Consumer Watchdog
on the case

For more than 40 years, our national network has been warning consumers about hidden dangers and helping them to protect themselves. In 2019, our Consumer Watchdog team continued to be on the case: We alerted the public to major food, drug and product recalls, worked to protect our privacy online, and more to keep consumers healthy, safe and secure.

You can cancel your credit card but you cannot cancel your face
It all started when Six Flags scanned a 14-year-old boy’s thumbprint without permission while issuing him a season pass.

In a landmark case on Jan. 25, 2019, the Illinois Supreme Court ruled that people can legally sue companies that unethically gather data, even without proof of injury. The decision reversed a previous ruling that the boy’s family couldn’t sue due to the absence of personal damages.

“Biometric information is uniquely sensitive,” said Abe Scarr, director of Illinois PIRG Education Fund. “You can cancel your credit card but you cannot cancel your face. Illinois’ biometric privacy law gives individuals the power to enforce the law when their rights have been violated. We applaud the Illinois Supreme Court for reaffirming consumers’ ability to effectively defend their rights.”

Illinois PIRG has been a leader in stopping two attempts by Facebook and others to gut the state’s uniquely strong biometric privacy law over the past three years. This ruling gives consumers some much-needed control over their personal information.

How safe is our food? Not safe enough, says PIRG Consumer Watchdog team, and it’s trending in the wrong direction.
Unsafe food recalls in the U.S. are trending the wrong way. From 2013 to 2017, they were up 10 percent overall, and up a whopping 83 percent for the most hazardous meat and poultry recalls.

These were the chief findings in 2019’s “How Safe Is Our Food?” report, written by U.S. PIRG Education Fund—the research and policy arm of our national network—and co-released by Illinois PIRG on Jan. 17.

“We need to be looking for these farm-to-fork preventative solutions that are logical,” PIRG Consumer Watchdog Adam Garber told USA Today. “By doing that, we can protect people’s health.”

To address our food safety problem, our national network’s Consumer Watchdog team is calling for public health standards for agricultural water, a ban on salmonella in meat, and better recalls to get dangerous food out of people’s homes.
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