

Balloon Litter in Virginia Talking Points for 2021 Legislation, HB-2159

Delegate Nancy Guy (83rd District) has introduced a bill (HB-2159) in the 2021 General Assembly session to ban intentional outdoor balloon releases in Virginia.

We have extensive experience and documentation of Balloon Litter on Virginia's coastal beaches and in state waterways:

1. Organizations like the Virginia Aquarium & Marine Science Center, Clean Virginia Waterways, Christina Trapani Consulting and Virginia's Coastal Zone Management Program have been involved with monitoring coastal shorelines, water quality, and marine animal health in the state for more than 25 years. Aquarium staff have conducted coastal surveys, responded to stranded animals, and identified and documented the impacts of balloons on the environment.

We know first-hand that Balloons are a very serious Litter Problem:

2. During a 4-year, state-wide study of marine debris on coastal beaches of Virginia, balloons were in the top five most common items recorded on three of the four beaches studied¹.
3. From June 2013 – November 2017, one-day surveys were conducted on Virginia's remote, uninhabited barrier islands²:
 - 46 surveys were conducted on more than 110 linear miles of remote Virginia beaches, resulting in **more than 11,000 balloons and pieces of balloon related litter**.
 - **More than 150 balloons and balloon parts were recorded per mile on some beaches.**
 - **Balloons were among the top three forms of all litter observed.**
4. **Balloon Litter injures and kills wildlife – more than 30 animal species are known to be impacted by balloons.** The Virginia Aquarium's nationally recognized, marine animal stranding response team has documented numerous balloons ingested by endangered sea turtles and marine mammals.
5. **The Commonwealth and Virginia localities are expending resources to try to clean up this problem.** In the Virginia Marine Debris Reduction Plan³, created by the Department of Environmental Quality's Coastal Zone Management Program, **the Balloon Litter problem is one of the state's top four priorities.**

Despite the habitat and wildlife impacts associated with Balloon Litter:

6. **In Virginia, it is currently legal to release up to 49 balloons of any type within a one-hour period – in essence, it is legal to litter.** We have documented that these balloons end up in the environment and affect coastal wildlife. Released balloons are a particularly insidious form of litter because of the ease with which they travel great distances and impact even remote areas. We have documented balloons on Virginia beaches from as far away as Northern Virginia and even other states such as North Carolina, Maryland, New York, West Virginia, and Kansas.

People continue to purchase balloons with the intent to release them and are, in fact, purposefully, but perhaps unknowingly, littering

7. Though sometimes marketed as “biodegradable”, balloons released into the environment, even latex balloons, act just like other plastic waste – they can persist for years, fouling habitats and threatening wildlife.
8. Delegate Guy’s bill is not about banning balloons or the sale of balloons – it is about preventing intentional outdoor balloon releases, which is littering. We know that balloons can be enjoyed responsibly⁴. Even The Balloon Council trade association, through its Smart Balloon Practices program, advocates that balloons should not be intentionally released. Their statement reads: *“Worth the Weight: The Balloon Council says balloons should not be released. Americans love balloons, but for many reasons no longer support balloon releases. ... We stand with communities by encouraging that balloons be weighted, not released outdoors, and disposed of properly when broken or deflated. Whether it’s a single balloon or hundreds, let’s keep them from flying away.”*⁵
9. In summary, we believe that Virginia’s current law regarding balloon releases is outdated and needs to be changed to prevent further environmental impacts and provide appropriate penalties for Balloon Littering violations. **Virginia was one of the first states to introduce legislation prohibiting mass balloon releases in 1991. We now have the documentation and knowledge to know that any balloon releases pose potentially significant impacts to coastal habitats and dangers to wildlife. Virginia can once again be a leader on this important issue and we thank you for your consideration of this reasonable legislation whose time has come.**

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¹ Register, K., Trapani, C., Swingle, M. 2019. *Monitoring Marine Debris in Virginia’s Coastal Zone, Project Report: April 2014 through June 2018*. NOAA CZM Grant NA16NOS4190171, Task 81. Virginia Aquarium & Marine Science Center Foundation Scientific Report 2019-03, Virginia Beach, VA, 80 pp.

² Trapani, C., O’Hara, K., & Register K. 2018. *Balloon Litter on Virginia’s Remote Beaches: Results of Monitoring from 2013 through 2017*. Clean Virginia Waterways, Longwood University.

³ Register, K., McKay L. 2016. *Virginia Marine Debris Reduction Plan*. Prepared for the Virginia Coastal Zone Management Program. 20pp.

⁴ PreventBalloonLitter.org – information website.

⁵ The Balloon Council. *Worth the Weight: The Balloon Council says balloons should not be released*. [TBC-Stance-on-Balloon-Releases-2018.pdf \(theballooncouncil.org\)](https://www.theballooncouncil.org/TBC-Stance-on-Balloon-Releases-2018.pdf)