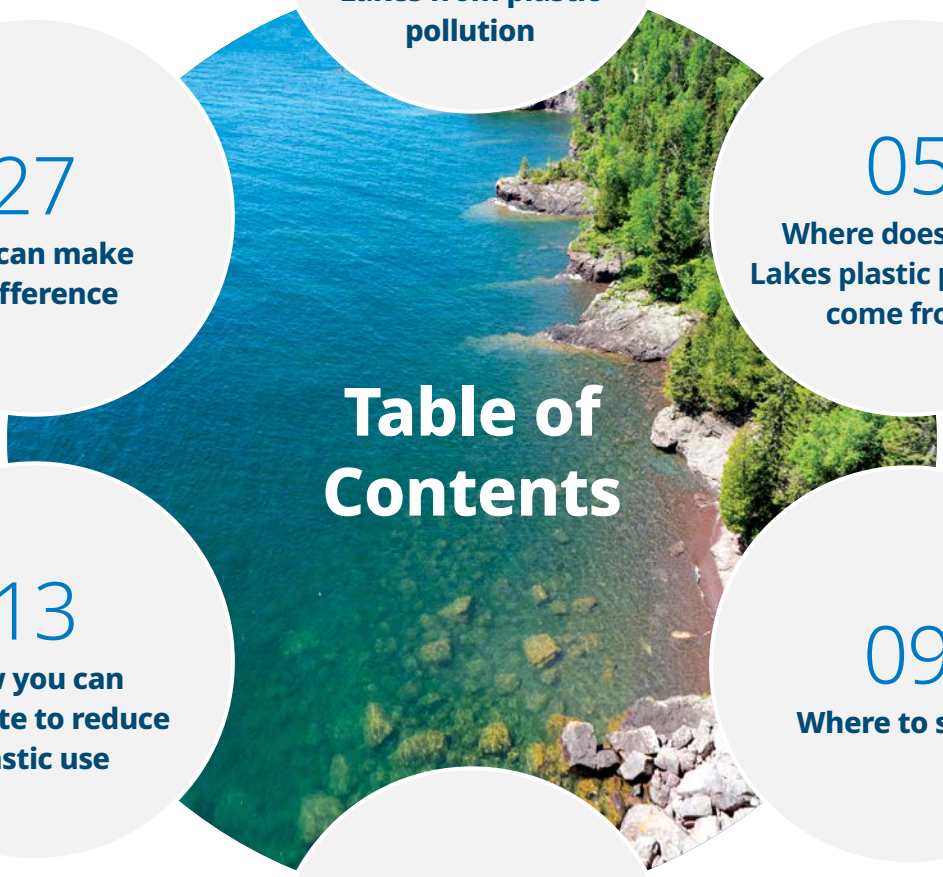
ALLIANCE for the GREAT LAKES

Plastic Free Great Lakes

An advocacy toolkit to make a difference in your community

UPDATED JULY 2024
Available online at greatlakes.org/plastic-free

Table of Contents



Background: Protecting our Great Lakes from plastic pollution

We all love and depend on clean water. Unfortunately, plastic is polluting our water—in the Great Lakes and around the world. Plastic pollution is everywhere: beaches, rivers, lakes, and even drinking water. In the Great Lakes, the pollution starts during manufacturing and continues as single-use plastic items become trash.

More than 22 million pounds of plastic pollution end up in the Great Lakes every year. On Great Lakes shorelines, 86% of litter collected by our Adopt-a-Beach volunteers is composed either partially or fully of plastic.

And plastic never really goes away. Instead, it just breaks down into smaller and smaller pieces known as "microplastics." Researchers have found stunningly high amounts of tiny plastic pieces in all five Great Lakes, which provide drinking water for 40 million people. They've found microplastics in Great Lakes fish, drinking water, bottled water, and beer.

While discarded plastic poses serious risks, perhaps the greatest environmental injustices are seen during plastic production. Plastic products are made from oil and gas, and also contain chemical additives such as flame retardants, UV stabilizers, and colorants that are added to the plastics during manufacturing.

Some of these chemicals are familiar pollutants in the Great Lakes region and include benzene, PFAS, phthalates, and metals (mercury, lead, cadmium). Many are known chemicals of concern and are very dangerous for workers and surrounding communities, and the impacts are not felt equally.

These plastics are making their way into human bodies. It's estimated that we each ingest about a credit card-sized amount of plastic each week. Microplastics have been found in human blood, lungs, stool, and even breast milk. A growing body of research is identifying the health impacts and costs caused by plastic. In particular, the chemicals used in plastics have been described as contributing to disease and disability.

Participants at a September cleanup at 63rd Street Beach in Chicago in 2009.

Photo Credit: Lloyd DeGrane

1 https://oceanconservancy.org/blog/2019/04/23/plastic-pollution-chemical-pollution/

2 The Minderoo-Monaco Commission on Plastics and Human Health. **Ann Glob Health. 2023 Mar 21;89(1):23**. doi: 10.5334/aogh

Plastic within the Great Lakes ecosystem is having a large impact on wildlife as well. A University of Toronto study found that 90% of Great Lakes water samples taken from the last 10 years contain microplastic levels that are "unsafe for wildlife." Wildlife ingest pieces of plastic, often mistaking them for food, and become entangled by plastic items such as fishing line.

Plastic pollution is not an insurmountable problem. The Alliance has long worked to remove plastic waste from the Great Lakes through beach cleanups, as well as pushing for laws and policies like the 2015 federal ban on plastic microbeads formerly used in facial scrubs and other toiletries. Individuals like you can play an important role in creating these changes.

WHAT'S IN THIS TOOLKIT?

This toolkit will give you information about:

- Where plastic pollution comes from
- Some of the effects of plastic pollution
- Solutions, including policies that are already working to reduce plastic pollution
- How you can advocate in your community for policies that will make a difference

Where does Great Lakes plastic pollution come from?

Plastic pollution in the Great Lakes comes from many places, including the manufacturing process, the prevalence of single-use plastic packaging, and microfibers from our washing machines.

MANUFACTURING

The petrochemical facilities that produce plastics have a toxic impact on surrounding communities.

"The fear of drinking water with microplastic and contaminants is real; however, the burden for families living near or working in petrochemical plants is orders of magnitude different," according to Andrea Densham, senior policy advisor at the Alliance for the Great Lakes.

From Louisiana and Texas to Illinois and Michigan, petrochemical and plastics plants are predominantly located in low-income communities and communities of color. Factories manufacturing plastics emit highly toxic, cancer-causing emissions and pose serious safety risks. Residents living near these facilities typically already bear disproportionate pollution burdens from other sources and often have trouble obtaining transparency and protection from the major industry players and government regulators.

As the country slowly shifts away from fossil fuels for energy and transportation, plastic production is often described as a "lifeline" for the oil and gas industry. Plastics are made from petroleum and typically contain toxic "forever chemicals" like PFAs, synthetic compounds found in many household goods and linked to harms including increased risk of cancer, developmental problems, and interference with hormonal processes.

Industrial plastic pellets (informally called nurdles) are the building blocks of plastic products and are found littering the shores of every Great Lake. They are small pellets of plastic and chemical additives less than 5 millimeters in size that are processed into products such as plastic bottles, cups, and packaging.

MICROPLASTICS HAVE BEEN FOUND IN:

FISH **DRINKING WATER** **HUMAN BLOOD**

Industrial pellets are spilled during the manufacturing supply chain, which can happen during container loading, from improper disposal at factories, or from a spill, which have been documented in the Great Lakes region. The pellets and the toxic chemicals that are attached can then go on to harm the environment, wildlife, drinking water, and people, just like any other microplastic. It is time for us to hold producers accountable for spilling and disposing of these pollutants into our waterways.

Plastic production is also contributing to greenhouse gas emissions. A recent study conducted by scientists at the Lawrence Berkeley National Lab estimates that by 2050, plastic production could account for between 21% to 31% of the global carbon emission budget required to limit global temperature increase to just 1.5 degrees Celsius. While we are seeing progress in a transition to sustainable energy, we have not seen the same transition in the production of single-use plastic. Currently, the industry is responsible for four times more greenhouse gas emissions than the airline industry, or about 600 coal-fired power plants. Reducing 1 million tons of plastic from production would equal shutting down 28 coal-fired power plants. Over the past 65 years, the annual production of plastic has increased exponentially and is projected to continue to grow if we do not act now. Over half of the plastic ever manufactured has been produced since 2000.

SHORELINE LITTER

For more than 20 years, the Alliance's Adopt-a-Beach volunteers have recorded data about the litter they find on Great Lakes shorelines. A recent report on this data found that 86% of the litter is plastic, and many are single–use items—used once and left behind—that contain plastic. Many are there because people left them on the beach or they blew onto the beach from a nearby source. Some of the top items include single-use plastics such as plastic bottle caps, food wrappers, straws, plastic bottles, and plastic bags.

The average single-use plastic shopping bag is used for just 12 minutes, yet can persist for 10 to 20 years in the environment as it slowly breaks apart into microplastics. The lightweight nature of plastic foam, sometimes referred to by the brand name Styrofoam, allows it to easily break up and disperse into the environment. Cleanup volunteers also find many tiny pieces of plastic. The first and third most common items collected on the beach are plastic pieces and foam pieces measuring 2.5 centimeters or less.

Small pieces of plastic collected at an Adopt-a-Beach cleanup.

Photo Credit: Olivia Reda

2 https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7494121/

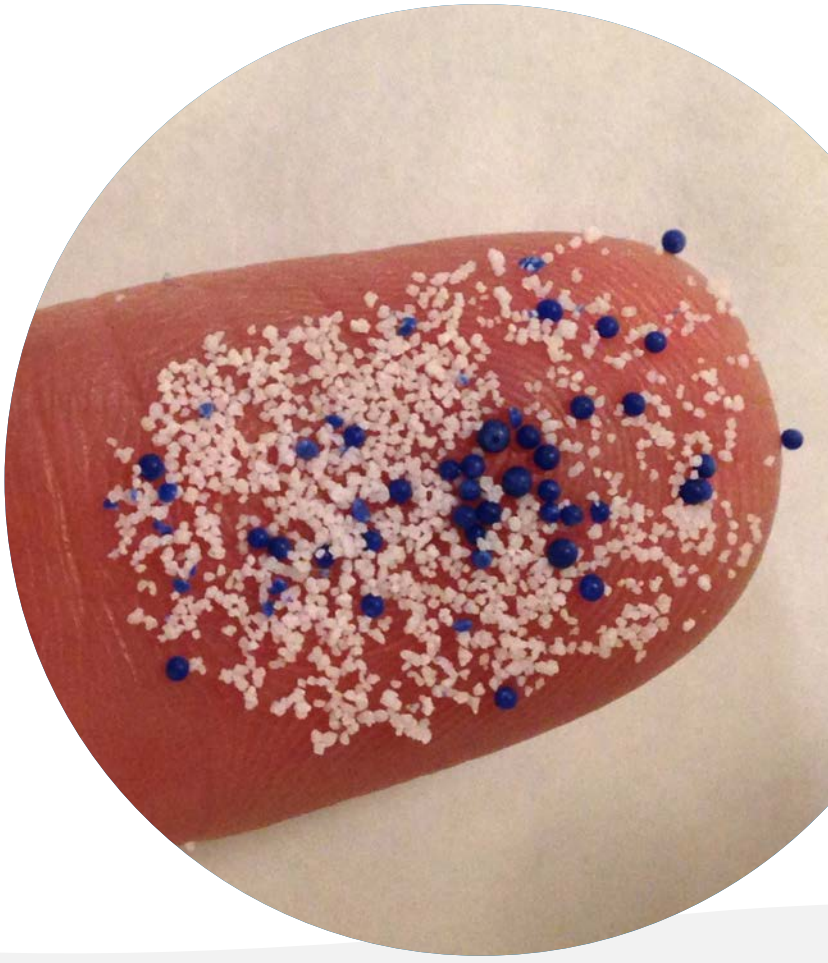
IN THE WATER

Microfibers, tiny thread-like pieces of plastic shed from synthetic textiles, are the most common form of microplastic pollution in the environment. Just a single load of laundry can release up to 18 million microfibers. Scientists have recently estimated that 5.6 million metric tons (MMT) of synthetic microfibers were emitted from washing machines between 1950 and 2016.[3] Approximately half were emitted during the last decade alone.

In addition to harming fish and other wildlife, ecosystems, and the communities that depend on them, microfibers are consumed by humans in the food we eat, the water we drink, and the air we breathe. Once they are released into the environment, they're nearly impossible to clean up. They leach toxic chemicals, including per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), into the environment and adsorb and transport other pollutants they encounter. These pollutants are then passed on to wildlife and humans through ingestion and other pathways.

Microfibers are the most common microplastics consumed by fishes, aquatic crustaceans, and bivalves—often representing more than 90% of plastic ingested. Reported impacts of microfiber ingestion on wildlife include blocked digestive tracts, reduced nutrient absorption and food consumption, internal damage, reduced energy for growth, and altered gene expression.

There's a simple fix for microfibers released in the wash: washing machines with built-in microfiber filters. Already available in Asia and the EU, we're working to bring them to Great Lakes states, as well as encouraging manufacturers to build them here too.



3 https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7494121/

RECYCLING CAN'T SOLVE THE PROBLEM

While the plastics industry often cites recycling as a solution, many plastics are not designed to be recycled. It is time we look for solutions that start to address the problem at the source, preventing harm from the start. Focusing on recycling as the only solution also shifts the burden of addressing plastic pollution away from the manufacturers who produce it and onto local communities and individuals.

Even some items labeled as recyclable are not. Plastics labeled #6 are an example. When plastics are not designed to be recycled, no matter what an individual tries to do in terms of recycling, the item is pre-determined to be a single-use object.

Two of the worst single-use plastics that are nearly impossible to recycle are plastic polystyrene foam, sometimes referred to by the brand name Styrofoam, and plastic bags.

Foam easily breaks apart in the environment, where it does not biodegrade. Once the foam pieces end up in our waterways, it is nearly impossible to clean them up. The chemical components of foam and the fact that many foam products are contaminated due to their contact with food are additional factors that make them nearly impossible to recycle. The chemical styrene, from which polystyrene is made, is a possible human carcinogen. There are several foam container factories in the Great Lakes region, so the impact on our region is twofold, from production and when foam becomes waste. Also, like other plastic products, plastic foam contains chemical additives, which can leach into food, beverages, and the environment. Research has shown that chemicals leaching from plastic foam are toxic to aquatic animals.

The average single-use plastic shopping bag can persist for decades in the environment and is difficult to recycle. In most places, they cannot be recycled at curbside bins, but rather have to be recycled separately. If they are incorrectly included in curbside bins and recycled with other materials, the thin plastic bags get tangled and stuck in the sorting equipment at recycling centers and slow down the process, causing workers to have to manually remove them. For reasons like this, many plastic bags end up in landfills or incinerators and, like foam, result in local communities paying the price of this single-use product.

Like other plastic products, plastic bags and foam can cause harm during their entire life cycle, including during production and disposal. Byproducts of production can pollute the water, harming neighborhoods near factories.

People can check what can be recycled where they live and may find out that many local governments don't have the capacity to recycle much of the plastic waste that comes into our lives. That is why we can't rely on individual behavior to solve the plastic pollution problem. Instead, we need to hold manufacturers accountable throughout the life cycle and encourage them to move toward reusable items and other sustainable options, and away from single-use plastic.

Where to start?

Plastic pollution is a large and systemic problem, but the good news is we have solutions. We can start with commonsense solutions that can have a big impact right away. The first step is prevention, which is cost-effective, prevents harm at the source, and does not require costly cleanup after the fact. The end goal is to make manufacturers and brands responsible for reducing single-use plastic and instead move toward reusable solutions, and less toxic, more sustainable alternatives. By starting with prevention, we reduce pollution at the source, keep our drinking water and waterways healthy, reduce very costly cleanup of plastic pollution, and protect our communities' health for years to come.

Ultimately, substantially reducing plastic pollution will require action from businesses, governments, and manufacturers. That's why Extended Producer Responsibility policies are so important—holding producers responsible across the life cycle of their products and packaging from design and materials to end-of-life management. Such policies have been in place for years in Europe and the Canadian provinces of Ontario and Quebec. California, Colorado, Maine, Oregon, and Minnesota, the first Great Lakes state, have passed versions of these commonsense solutions, which are now being considered in other states across the Great Lakes basin.

Plastic and other debris removed by volunteers at an Adopt-a-Beach cleanup.

PC: Lloyd DeGrane

Removing plastic from Rainbow Beach in Chicago at an Adopt-a-Beach cleanup in 2022.

PC: Lloyd DeGrane

Policy Solutions

PREVENT POLLUTION AT THE SOURCE

Problem: Single-use plastics. Especially the worst of the worst: Polystyrene foam and plastic bags. It's time to say farewell to two of the worst single-use plastics: plastic foam and bags. Polystyrene, known more commonly by the brand name Styrofoam, is nearly impossible to recycle, and easily breaks down into toxic microplastic particles in the environment. The average single-use plastic shopping bag is used for just 12 minutes, yet can persist for 10 to 20 years in the environment as it slowly breaks apart into microplastics.

Solution: Single-use foam and plastic bag bans. Ending the sale of single-use foam food ware and single-use plastic shopping bags aims to reduce these common sources of microplastic.

PROTECT OUR DRINKING WATER AND OUR FISH AND WILDLIFE

Current problem: Plastic microfibers that wash down the drain. In just one load of laundry, clothing and textiles made from synthetic fibers can shed up to 18 million plastic microfibers into the water. These fibers escape wastewater treatment plants and flow with the discharge into our waterways. Once in the environment, these fibers are nearly impossible to remove, which means prevention is key.

Solution: Washing machines with microfiber filters. Already available in Asia and the EU, we're working to bring washing machines with built-in microfilters to Great Lakes states. Policies include requiring microfilters in new machines, encouraging manufacturers to build microfilter-equipped machines in the region, and consumer rebates for microfilters.

MONITORING OUR DRINKING WATER TO ENSURE IT IS FREE OF MICROPLASTIC AND FIBERS

Problem: Microplastics in drinking water. Our drinking water is currently monitored for a range of pollutants that negatively impact human health. Many municipal water providers do not monitor for plastic pollutants because it is not required by law in most places.

Policy solution: Ongoing monitoring of drinking water. We should be monitoring for microplastic and microfibers just as we do for other toxic contaminants. Monitoring will help us better understand the pervasiveness of microplastics, ensure action can be taken as additional health impacts are identified, and increase pressure on decision makers to address this issue.

REDUCE SINGLE-USE PLASTICS

Problem: Brands and producers create single-use plastic items we cannot recycle or reuse. When they are not responsible for disposal of the plastic products they produce, plastic manufacturers have little incentive to sell recyclable or reusable materials.

Solution: Hold plastic manufacturers responsible for what they produce. Policies called Extended Producer Responsibility hold producers responsible for reducing the amount of plastic they produce, increasing reuse and recyclable content, and encouraging sustainable packaging that reduces pollution and carbon emissions. In the Great Lakes, Minnesota passed an Extended Producer Responsibility law in 2024 to reduce packaging waste. These policies should be expanded and implemented in other Great Lakes states, as well as nationally.

MINNESOTA BECOMES THE FIRST GREAT LAKES STATE TO PASS AN EXTENDED PRODUCER RESPONSIBILITY LAW

In 2024, Minnesota passed a law that holds packaging manufacturers accountable for the waste they produce. The Packaging Waste & Cost Reduction Act will reduce packaging and improve Minnesota's recycling systems by requiring the largest packaging manufacturers to pay fees that fund recycling costs. It also requires manufacturers to redesign their packaging to be reusable, recyclable, or compostable by 2032, and sets targets for them to meet along the way. These types of Extended Producer Responsibility laws will help reduce plastic pollution entering our waterways, protecting our region's lakes. **It is time to pass these critical laws in all Great Lakes states, as well as nationally.**

MAKE IT EASIER TO USE REFILLABLE AND REUSABLE CONTAINERS

Problem: It can be difficult or impossible to use refillable or reusable containers. More reuse can eliminate single-use plastic.

Solution: Provide options for refill and reuse. Install more water refill stations in publicly funded locations such as parks and schools. Pass laws that enable refilling containers at grocery and beauty care stores. Require refillable shampoo and soap containers at hotels, a change we successfully passed into law in Illinois.

STOP THE SPILLING OF INDUSTRIAL PLASTIC PELLETS

Problem: Industrial plastic pellets have been found in every Great Lake. These building blocks of plastic products are small pellets of plastic and chemical additives, and are spilled during the manufacturing process.

Solution: Treat spills of industrial plastic pellets like other chemical spills. Hold manufacturers accountable for spilling and disposing of these pollutants into our waterways.

Industrial plastic pellets (informally called nurdles) found in South Haven, Michigan.

Photo Credit: Juliann Krupa

MICROBEADS, AND HOW ADVOCATES MADE A DIFFERENCE.

Community action can lead to huge national changes. Research released in 2012 and 2013 found significant quantities of tiny plastic microbeads in the open waters of the Great Lakes. The microbeads were coming from products, like toothpaste and face wash, that used plastic microbeads as cleansers and exfoliants. Residents and organizations across the Great Lakes began to advocate for bans on personal care products containing plastic microbeads. Illinois became the first state to pass a ban on plastic microbeads in personal care products, and soon states and local governments across the country began considering similar bills. Industries struggled to navigate the patchwork of laws with varying timelines and definitions, eventually turning to Congress, which passed a federal ban creating a unified national policy eliminating microbeads from personal care products. As of 2018, these products—and the plastic pollution they create—have been completely phased out.

How You Can Advocate to Reduce Plastic Use

Start by asking questions

Your town, your park district, and your school board all have policies that affect plastic pollution. Start by learning what's happening in your community.

Find out:

- Are there water refill stations at your public parks and schools?
- Does your school board have a purchasing policy that bans single-use plastic, including polystyrene foam cups and food containers?
- Has your local community center moved to reusable items to save money and waste on single-use plastic?
- Does your city or state allow you to bring your own reusable containers to grocery stores and restaurants?

Make your change happen

Once you've learned what's going on in your community, pick one thing you want to change—and find out who can make that change happen. For instance, if you want to see water refill stations at all your public parks and beaches, your park district board members might be the people who can make the decision and allocate money to pay for it.

After you know what you want to change and who can make it happen, it's time to build support and contact the decision makers. Many of the tactics in the following pages can help in both ways—to educate and build support in your community, as well as persuade decision makers. Here are some tools to help:

Reusable tote bag on the shoreline of the Great Lakes.

Photo Credit: Olivia Reda

Drinking Lake Superior water from a reusable water bottle after pumping it through a micro mesh filter.

Photo Credit: Lloyd DeGrane

BUILDING SUPPORT: WRITE A LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Writing a letter to the editor is a good way to send decision makers a powerful, public message about the importance of protecting the Great Lakes and clean water.

Here are six simple steps to write your letter and get it published:

Choose what to write in your letter to the editor (LTE). LTEs should be able to stand on their own and make sense to readers who may not already be familiar with plastic pollution issues. LTEs that respond to a recent article are most likely to be published, so consider monitoring your local news outlets for the right opportunity, such as articles related to water pollution, plastics, drinking water, wildlife, or other Great Lakes and water issues. The best LTEs are an opportunity for you to use your personal experience to offer a new perspective on the newspaper's existing coverage.

Write your LTE. LTEs should be focused and direct. Trying to cover several topics and making too many points reduces a letter's impact, so try to keep to one subject if possible. Explain the problem that you see, and how you think the officials you're writing about can help.

Keep it brief. Newspapers and online outlets have different word count requirements for LTEs, but in general it is best to keep them as short and succinct as possible (usually no more than 250 words).

List your info. Always include your credentials and contact information, as most publications will require written verification that you have authored the piece. For example, if you're writing about plastic pollution and you were an Adopt-a-Beach team leader, make sure to include that information!

Submit your LTE. Each outlet has different LTE submission guidelines, so be sure to check the outlet's website for specific guidance. Usually, you will need to send an email to an address specifically assigned to letters to the editor at the particular publication, or to the letters/opinion editor directly. When you send in your letter, include a note in the email about why your LTE is timely, interesting, and relevant, connecting it to any recent coverage about the Great Lakes, if possible. Include the text of your letter in your email, not as an attachment.

Follow up after you submit. Most newspapers have areas online where you can post comments to articles. If your LTE does not get placed within 24 hours, give the letters/opinion editor a call and/or consider going online and adding your letter as a comment to a story.

BUILDING SUPPORT: SPEAK OUT ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Another great way to build support for reducing plastic pollution is speaking out on social media. Here are some tips to get you started:

Use a hashtag. Tapping into trending hashtags—#GreatLakes, #PlasticPollution, etc.—is a great way to track a conversation and follow key issues.

Be relevant. Hook your audience and stay relevant to decision makers and others in the conversation. Use interesting facts, photos, or links. For example, link to a recent news article, refer to current events in your community, and use relatable material.

Keep it simple. It's great to provide interesting information, but a social media post is not an encyclopedia entry. Get to the point quickly and clearly.

Make your ask. Your posts should make it clear what questions you're asking and what action you want decision makers to take.

Tag elected officials. Ask decision makers questions directly by tagging them in your posts by using the @ sign with their official handle. You typically can find social media handles on their official websites.

Follow social media accounts that give you the information you need. Keeping up with news outlets and issue organizations is a great way to stay informed about plastic pollution. Understand that different accounts have different goals—from providing information to influencing opinion—so read with a critical eye. Find us on X/Twitter (@A4GL), Instagram (@alliance4greatlakes), Facebook (Alliance for the Great Lakes), and LinkedIn (Alliance for the Great Lakes).

Individuals of all ages can make a difference in their community through the Adopt-a-Beach program.

Photo Credit: Lloyd DeGrane

BUILDING SUPPORT: ORGANIZE YOUR COMMUNITY

There's no reason to go it alone. When you work with existing groups or recruit other community members, you can form a strong, diverse group to fight plastic pollution. Always set clear goals for engaging community members: Do you want to get petition signatures? Distribute educational materials? Recruit volunteers for upcoming events? Or use your public speaking skills to move people to action? Answering these questions will inform your efforts.

You can also consider becoming an Alliance for the Great Lakes Ambassador. Our Ambassadors are volunteers who represent the Alliance at events across the region. We give Ambassadors regular trainings in how to advocate for the Great Lakes and opportunities to learn from experts about topics like plastic pollution. We also help Ambassadors build skills like public speaking and tabling. You can learn more and sign up on our website.

Adopt-a-Beach volunteer picking up a plastic water bottle.

Photo Credit: Lloyd DeGrane

Here are a few ideas for engaging people around plastic pollution:

- **Table at an Event:** Many festivals, community events, and even some stores allow organizations to set up informational tables. Just ask the event organizers or managers if you can set up a table. This is an excellent opportunity to connect with people in an informal setting around their interests and yours.
- **Make an Announcement:** Other community events, like community meetings, service group meetings, and church services, can also be great opportunities to spread the word. Ask event organizers for permission to make an announcement about your efforts.
- **Post Information or Flyers Where People Will See Them:** Even if you can't talk to everybody you want to about stopping plastic pollution, your message can still reach members of your community. Ask to hang informational posters or flyers in public spaces or on community bulletin boards. Shop windows, community centers, and libraries are great places to start.
- **Host Your Own Event:** You can host an event to bring together other community members that support your cause. A screening of a film about plastic pollution or organizing an Adopt-a-Beach cleanup event are fun and informative ways to educate and organize your community.

Below is a list of materials that can be useful when talking to people about plastic pollution:

- **Make yourself a cheat sheet:** Create a list of important points about the Great Lakes and plastic pollution. Preparing your talking points will help you get your message across in a short and effective way.
- **Bring handouts:** Pass out fact sheets or information about upcoming Adopt-a-Beach cleanups, public hearings, or other events people might be interested in joining.
- **Bring sign-in sheets or petition forms:** Collect contact information so you can follow up with people who are interested in getting involved. If you're collecting petitions, have copies on hand and consider providing a way for people to sign electronically. Bring pens and clipboards as needed.
- **Bring giveaways:** People love free sustainable or informational giveaways. Stickers, reusable shopping bags, or reusable water bottles can help draw visitors to your table.
- **Use attention-grabbing visuals:** Plastic pollution can be very eye-catching. Bring photos or even actual plastic pollution from your neighborhood. Make a sculpture out of debris collected or the plastic you have used. Be creative!

Pieces of plastic found on the shoreline of the Great Lakes at an Adopt-a-Beach cleanup.

PC: Lloyd DeGrane.

WRITING A LETTER TO AN ELECTED OFFICIAL

Writing to your elected officials is an effective way to communicate your concerns to decision makers and advocate for solutions. This tactic can be especially effective when many constituents write letters about the same issue. When writing to your legislator, consider the following:

- Why is this issue important to your community?
- What is the legislator's track record on this issue, if any?
- What are the legislator's priority issues, and how does plastic pollution connect to those issues, if at all?
- What's the one thing you'd like your legislator to take away from this letter?

Additional tips:

- Make sure to mention you're one of their constituents.
- Keep it short.
- Be direct. State your purpose and make sure you clearly state the policy you want the decision maker to champion or support.
- Thank the legislator for taking the time to read your letter, and for any work the legislator has done on the issue.
- Provide your email and phone number so that someone from the office can follow up with you if they have questions or would like additional information.

Here's a sample letter or email you can send a local legislator:

Dear Honorable _____:

As one of your constituents, I am contacting you today to discuss the issue of plastic pollution in our community and the Great Lakes. Our local waterways are an essential part of our local environment and economy. They are too precious to needlessly pollute with plastic. [Insert your ask here, e.g., request a meeting, or ask them to support a specific piece of legislation or one of the policies mentioned earlier in this toolkit.]

Plastic pollution was once thought of as a problem only for the world's oceans, far from the Great Lakes. However, researchers recently found microplastics, tiny pieces of plastic smaller than 2.5 mm, in the Great Lakes with concentrations as high as 1 million particles per square kilometer, which is a higher concentration than many parts of the ocean. This is significant because the Great Lakes provide drinking water for more than 40 million people.

Many of these microplastics are fragments of larger plastic items like plastic bags and foam containers. Single-use plastic items, which are only used for a short time, can last in the Great Lakes for decades or longer and can be harmful in many ways: They litter our shorelines and beaches, they can be ingested by wildlife, and they can even enter our drinking water.

I have seen the impact of plastic pollution when I visit my favorite shoreline park, _____, and I am concerned about the impact it is having on our community.

Communities across the Great Lakes are taking action to stop plastic pollution. Many towns and cities have passed ordinances to reduce the use of single-use plastic, launched public education campaigns on the issue, and stopped using single-use plastic items like plastic water bottles at municipal facilities. [Repeat your ask.]

Thank you for your attention to this issue and your hard work to improve our community. I look forward to speaking with you.

Sincerely,
First and Last Name

Contact Information

PETITIONS 101

One of the most powerful ways to show support for a policy to reduce plastic pollution is to gather petition signatures. Presenting a successful petition to local legislators and other decision makers can be very influential. A good petition should clearly state the position you are taking and gather important identifying information from supporters—like name, ZIP code, and some form of contact information. See the example petition below for an idea of how to create your own.

Example petition:

Researchers have found that nearly 10,000 metric tons—or 22 million pounds—of plastic debris enter the Great Lakes every year from the United States and Canada. What's worse, plastic never really goes away; it just breaks down into smaller and smaller pieces. Tiny pieces of plastic smaller than 2.5 mm have been found in the Great Lakes with concentrations as high as 1 million particles per square kilometer. These microplastics have been found in drinking water and even beer. Many microplastics are fragments of larger, single-use plastic items like single-use plastic bags and foam containers. These items litter our shorelines and beaches, they can be ingested by wildlife, and can even enter our drinking water. Communities across the Great Lakes are taking action to stop plastic pollution, and it's time we join them. Our local waterways are an essential part of our local environment and economy. They are too precious to pollute with plastic. We the undersigned urge [insert legislator, municipality, etc.] to support a [plastic bag ban/microfilters in washing machines, etc.] in [your city/municipality/state].

NAME (FIRST, LAST)	ZIP CODE	PHONE NUMBER	EMAIL ADDRESS

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

TIPS FOR TALKING WITH DECISION MAKERS: IN PERSON, VIRTUALLY, AND OVER THE PHONE

An in-person meeting, a virtual meeting, or a phone call with decision makers are great opportunities to influence them on an issue you care about. We've provided some tips for the meeting itself, how to prepare ahead of time, and what to do afterward to effectively follow up.

Preparing for Your Meeting

- Make your meeting request by email and by phone.
  - Suggest specific times and dates.
  - Let them know what issue or piece of legislation (by bill number, if it has one) you want to discuss.
  - If you are a constituent of the elected official, or if your group includes constituents, make sure the official knows that when you schedule your meeting.
  - Decide who will be a part of your meeting.
  - Decide if you will hold the meeting alone or with allies.
  - Consider including people who represent the constituencies that are affected by the issue you are discussing.
  - Keep your group small. More than four to five people in one meeting can become unmanageable.
- Do your research
  - Take the time to learn about the person you're meeting with and if they've taken a position on your issue or similar issues in the past.
  - Study up on the views and arguments on both sides of your issue.
  - Use data, news stories, and other examples to support your position.

- Develop talking points
  - Draft three to five clear and concise points you'd like to make throughout the meeting, and refer back to them throughout.
  - If the meeting gets off track, use your talking points to steer the conversation back to your issue.
- Make a clear ask
  - Clearly define your goal for the meeting and make your objective explicit. For example, are you asking a legislator to vote for or against a bill? Sign a pledge? Plan and practice for your meeting.
  - Whether it's just you or a group, it is a good idea to practice your talking points.
  - Have a clear idea of the points you want to make and in what order.
  - When meeting as a group, identify roles and responsibilities for each participant. Who will say what?
- Bring or offer additional materials
  - Be prepared with reference materials such as fact sheets, news articles, or relevant research.
  - If your meeting is happening over the phone or virtually, offer to send the materials via email or mail.

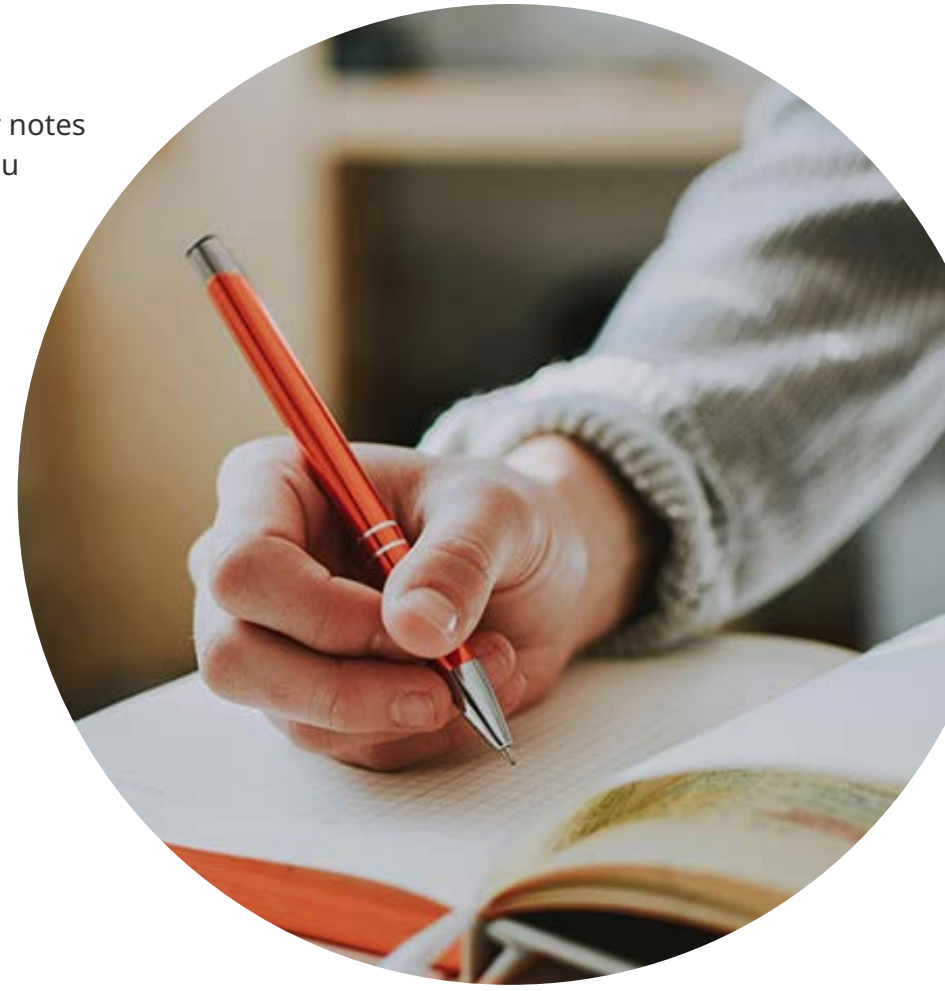
During Your Meeting

- Be prompt and efficient: Legislative offices generally have packed, tight schedules. Be on time and stay on message.
- Make it personal: Introduce yourself, and bring up any relevant personal, professional, or political connections or expertise you have.
- Take the time to prepare a brief introduction of who you are, why you're meeting with the decision maker, and what you'd like to speak about.
  - Example intro: Hi, my name is [your name] and I'm calling from [your location or affiliation] to talk to [decision maker] about potential solutions to plastic pollution in [your city/state/watershed]. Can you connect me with [decision maker] or someone else in your office who would be willing to speak with me about this issue?
- Meeting with staff: In some instances, you will be meeting with staff instead of meeting directly with the decision maker. Staff play a critical role in conveying information to decision makers. Meeting with staff in lieu of the decision maker is still a valuable opportunity, and you should treat staff the same way you would a decision maker.

- Unexpected questions: If you don't know the answer to a question, never make one up. Make a note of it and tell them you will look into it and get back to them. And then make sure to follow up with the answer. Try to get a commitment: Try to get a commitment to support your request. Ask questions and wait for the answers. Listen carefully. When in doubt, ask for clarification.
- Share your visit: If visiting with a decision maker in person, ask to take pictures with them. If allowed, you can share the pictures on social media. Feel free to share photos with us on social media or by sending to alliance@greatlakes.org—we'd love to see you in action!
- Say thank you: Thank the decision maker for their time and for any work the decision maker is doing on the issue.

After the Meeting

- Review your notes.
- Right after the meeting, review your notes and compare notes with others if you attended as a group.
- Get clear on your understanding of what was agreed upon in the meeting. Say thank you again.
- Send a personal thank-you letter to the person you met with, including a reminder of anything he or she may have agreed to do.
- Follow up with more information.
- If there were questions you were unable to answer, or if additional materials were requested, follow up on those tasks in a timely fashion.



SPEAKING IN A PUBLIC FORUM

Candidates, elected officials, and government agencies often hold public meetings where members of the public can provide comments on policies. These forums are a great opportunity to share your concerns. They're also an opportunity to organize a larger group of concerned constituents to magnify the impact of your comments.

Research where the meetings occur.

- Candidates may participate in forums organized by local groups.
- Local bodies, such as school boards, often hold public meetings and post about those meetings on their websites. They often follow a regular pattern (for example, the second Thursday of every month). The websites often have information about opportunities for the public to testify on issues before the board.
- Larger legislative bodies, such as city councils or your state's House of Representatives and Senate, may have committee meetings where members of the public can testify.

When you arrive, you may have to check in and add your name to a list of people testifying. There may be many people waiting to speak, and there may be a time limit on individual comments, such as one to two minutes. That's why it's most important to plan ahead so your comments are concise and effective. Keep your remarks short and direct.

- Make sure you tell them you are a constituent, and identify the issue you will discuss.
- In a few sentences, let them know why you are concerned about plastic pollution. Do you have a personal connection to the issue?
- Are you part of a larger group working on this issue? Organizing many constituents to speak out on an issue increases your chances of influencing policies.
- Make a specific ask: Is there a specific bill or policy you want them to pass, or is there a policy you oppose?
- Thank them for their work on the issue.
- The vast majority of community meetings are very civil, but occasionally opinions can get heated. The most effective way to communicate your message is by always staying respectful.

Example script:

Good evening. My name is _____ and I live in _____.

As your constituent, I'm here today to testify about [issue or bill].

[A few sentences about why the issue concerns you.] I'm very concerned about the prevalence of plastic pollution in our drinking water. During a recent beach cleanup I participated in, we found that most litter on our shores is plastic. That plastic enters our drinking water, where it can affect human health.

[Your specific ask.] That's why I urge you to support [name of bill or policy].

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

VOTE AND ENCOURAGE OTHERS TO VOTE

Voting is the most important way for you to have a voice in how elected officials protect our water.

Elections are sometimes very close, and every vote counts. Make sure to vote if you are a U.S. citizen, and help others in your community register and vote.

Learn about upcoming elections in your community and make sure you're registered to vote. The voter registration deadline in many states falls several weeks before Election Day. Visit our Great Lakes Voter Information Center at greatlakes.org/VoterInfo and enter your address to check the status of your registration. You can easily confirm if you are registered to vote. And, if you're not, you can easily find the information you need to register. Our tool also tells you about upcoming election dates.

You Can Make a Difference

Plastic pollution is a big problem, but you can make a difference. To keep our drinking water and waterways clean, we must prevent plastic pollution. When advocates across the Great Lakes are amplifying the calls to address plastic pollution, change is possible.

Let us know how it goes, and feel free to reach out anytime by emailing us at alliance@greatlakes.org.

Thank you for everything you do for our Great Lakes!

Weighing collected litter at a cleanup at Montrose Beach in Chicago in 2019.

Photo Credit: Lloyd DeGrane

Adopt-a-Beach volunteers recording litter data at a cleanup at Montrose Beach in Chicago in 2023.

Photo Credit: Lloyd DeGrane

Picking up litter at an Adopt-a-Beach cleanup at Jeorse Park Beach in East Chicago, Indiana, in 2023.

Photo Credit: Lloyd DeGrane

ALLIANCE *for the*
GREAT LAKES

PROTECTING WATER, SUSTAINING LIFE

The Alliance for the Great Lakes is a nonpartisan nonprofit working across the region to protect our most precious resource: the fresh, clean, and natural waters of the Great Lakes. Learn more at greatlakes.org.