

Promoting a greener Nevada by reducing plastic pollution

By Samantha Thompson

In recognition of Earth Day on April 22, the Nevada Division of Environmental Protection's Recycling Program is helping to educate communities about the threats posed by "plastic pollution" throughout the state, and how to lessen the impact of plastic pollution to Nevada's unique natural environment.

Plastic pollution refers to the accumulation of plastic waste that has negatively impacted the natural environment in the form of air, water, and land pollution. Plastic is composed of numerous toxic materials, and when not properly disposed of or recycled, can damage our natural environment. Plastic pollution harms plants and trees, endangers wildlife, degrades waterways, and poses threats to our overall public health.

The U.S. discards more than 30 million tons of plastic each year, but only 8 percent of this waste gets recycled. The rest, nearly 27,600,000 tons, ends up in landfills, is burned, or litters the environment.

Even plastic properly discarded in landfills impacts the environment and consumes energy resources. Many plastic items take up to 1,000 years to decompose, even in landfills where precious water resources are used to help facilitate the natural decomposition process. As the driest state in the U.S., it is critical to manage Nevada's limited water resources carefully, and one way to achieve this is by reducing plastic pollution in our landfills and encouraging greater recycling of plastic waste. Plastics dumped in Nevada landfills or discarded into our natural environment will never break down easily (or ever), and the effects can be irreversible. But you can help reduce plastic pollution in

Nevada.

The Nevada Recycles program, which strives to achieve a 25 percent recycling rate statewide, offers the following tips to help reduce plastic pollution and support public health:

- Opt for reusable shopping bags, rather than single-use plastic bags.
- Keep reusable eating/drinking utensils on hand – including forks, spoons, knives, straws, and cups – and avoid using single-use plastic utensils.
- Forgo to-go containers; even paper coffee cups are often lined with plastic.
- Avoid storing or microwaving foods/beverages in plastic containers whenever possible.
- Replace plastic baggies, plastic wrap, and other food storage with reusable glass containers or jars.

Some of the evidence-based, long-term effects of plastic pollution include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Plastic has negatively affected wildlife, as animals often become entangled in plastic, or they may eat it and/or feed it to their young.
- Burning plastic releases toxic chemicals into the air, which can cause respiratory issues.
- Plastic pollution can affect the economy, due to the impact on public health, wildlife, the environment, and more.

“The Nevada Recycles program is dedicated to reducing waste generation and increasing recycling throughout Nevada,” said Eric Noack, bureau chief of Nevada Waste Management within the Nevada Division of Environmental Protection. “By reaching out to our communities and collaborating with local jurisdictions,

schools, and partner agencies, our goal is to help educate people of all ages about steps they can take – both big and small – to actively recycle and reduce their plastic pollution and carbon footprint. We can all be part of the solution to end pollution, and foster a healthy, sustainable, and eco-friendly planet for generations to come.”

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