



Katie Frankowicz/The Daily Astorian  
Small, unidentifiable bits of plastic litter beaches in Clatsop County.

## Plastics: 'There's nobody that really wants it'

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Sea Turtles Forever and Blue Wave volunteers collected trash and plastic by hand on Presidents Day, plucking it from the grasses and boulders in the estuarine area on the north side of South Jetty. The Seaside nonprofits more commonly run filtration efforts on sandy beaches, using screens to sift the sand and pull out microplastics — plastic odds and ends so worn and broken it is often impossible to figure out their origin or purpose. The shards can be hazardous to marine animals that mistake them for food.

The microplastic volunteers gather goes to a nonrecyclable solid waste landfill in McMinnville, said Marc Ward, founder of Sea Turtles Forever. Almost none of the material is recyclable and there are concerns about toxic contaminants.

"It's a little difficult with beach debris," said Joy Hawkins, program manager at SOLVE, an Oregon nonprofit that organizes cleanups across the state. "... A lot of recycling facilities can't take dirty plastic, or if it's too sandy or if it's been out in the ocean too long it can contaminate the bales."

Cigarette butts, plastic bottles and caps, food wrappers and plastic bags are the most common litter SOLVE sees in Oregon. Some of these items — even the cigarette butts — can be recycled or upcycled, turned into something new. SOLVE works

with local haulers to collect and dispose of plastic and other trash when possible, but many plastics, especially microplastics, remain problematic.

"It's much more difficult than I think people realize to actually get the plastic to recycling facilities and have it be able to be recycled versus just doing what we can to get it off the beach," Hawkins said.

### Limited options

On many North Coast beaches, a sinuous carpet of microplastics marks the tide line. A paper published in the journal *Science* in 2015 estimated that as much as 12.7 million metric tons of plastic waste may have ended up in the ocean in 2010, while another study predicts that plastic in the ocean — pound for pound — could outweigh fish by 2050.

"This issue — marine microplastic — is far beyond the issue of large debris, much more complicated and a much greater threat to our oceans' survival," Ward said. He invented the sand filtration screens his organization uses. It is a tool that has been picked up in Cannon Beach, and Ward is working with parks and organizations outside of Oregon to employ his methods.

"All large marine plastic will become microplastic," he said, "so it is a worthy cause to remove the bottles and bags and other large items, but it is the microplastic that has the potential to disrupt the entire marine food web and create an environ-

mental pathway for 200 toxic contaminants back to us."

Richard Arterbury, president of the Ocean Blue Project, another Oregon-based group, has worked with companies to recycle rigid plastic, but the plastic is shipped to East Coast facilities. It's still better than having it all go into a landfill, but Arterbury hopes to establish partnerships with local recycling and manufacturing companies.

"The setback in Oregon is there's nobody that really wants it," he said, adding, "I think this plastic should be put back into the plastic products we keep using and buying."

Arterbury hopes hand-held devices the organization plans to start using to analyze and identify plastic will make it easier for them to sort and eventually reuse or recycle what they gather off the beaches they clean.

### Cleaning up

On a sunny March afternoon, Andie Sterling knelt in the sand not far from where Sea Turtles Forever and Blue Wave volunteers worked in February. She held up a tiny bit of plastic. It was distinct, the kind of color you get when a man-made object is roughened and reshaped by the ocean and the sand, bleached by sun and salt until it is a perfect warm, orange hue.

She stood, kicked at a tumble of dried grasses and found a short length of yellow

nylon rope. She had already found a handful of lighters, but she said she always finds lighters here. She's thinking that instead of throwing them away she should hang onto them, turn them into a display somehow.

Sterling, an Astoria-based artist and art teacher, didn't intend to start cleaning this area, but has started doing so regularly in the past few weeks, filling a bag with trash every time she visits. She plans to pass some of her finds on to her students to use in art pieces and will likely use bits of the nylon rope in her own art.

Like the nonprofits that organize cleanups in this area every year, she is happy knowing the trash isn't on the beach anymore, but she struggles with what to do with it after she's hauled it home. Her cleaning barely makes a dent.

"Right now I feel good about what we're doing," she said as she dropped bits of Styrofoam into a bright green reusable grocery bag. "Then I get home and I feel almost angry that now I'm responsible for finding out what to do with all of these things."

Sterling has helped clean up after hurricanes in her native Texas. She remembers many times when she would look up from the small patch where she was working and be overwhelmed by the amount of work still left to do. She would wonder, "How are we ever going to clean this up?"

"Then," she said, "you just get back down to it and clean up your little part."



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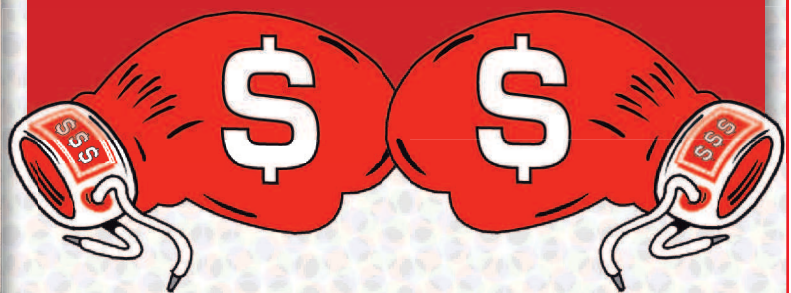
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