

Coke, Pepsi exit plastics association, Greenpeace claims victory

STEVE TOLOKEN

Plastics News Staff



Greenpeace

Greenpeace and other environmental organizations have been pressuring Coca-Cola Co. and PepsiCo Inc. to drop out of the Plastics Industry Association.

Coca-Cola Co. and PepsiCo Inc. are leaving the Plastics Industry Association, following pressure from environmental groups seeking to end plastics industry lobbying campaigns for state laws that limit local bans on plastic packaging.

Greenpeace USA announced the news in a July 23 news release. It portrayed the departures as a victory in a year-long effort to stop plastics industry

campaigns in favor of state laws that prevent cities and counties from passing restrictions on plastic and other kinds of packaging.

"Companies understand that they cannot publicly say they want to end plastic pollution, while financially supporting an association that lobbies for our continued reliance on throwaway plastics," said John Hocevar, oceans campaign director for Greenpeace USA.

In an emailed statement, Atlanta-based Coca-Cola confirmed it left the association over policy differences.

"The Coca-Cola Co. is no longer a member of the Plastics Industry Association," the company said. "We withdrew earlier this year as a result of positions the organization was taking that were not fully consistent with our commitments and goals."

Coke declined to elaborate on what those policy differences were, but both soft drink companies have been under pressure over plastic bottle waste. Greenpeace framed Coke's departure as part of the larger efforts to pressure consumer product companies to leave the plastics association.

PepsiCo said in a statement that it joined the association as part of its work toward a more circular economy for plastics and to learn about material innovation.

"We do not participate in the policy advocacy work of the association or its subsidiaries, and our membership will conclude at the end of this year," PepsiCo said.

The Sierra Club, Walden Asset Management and As You Sow began public campaigns last year to put pressure on brand owners, and they have had some success.

Medical device maker Becton, Dickinson & Co. said it left the plastics association because it had taken lobbying positions "inconsistent with BD's views on sustainability." Clorox Co. wrote last year that it would be leaving the association.

In January, SC Johnson indicated differences with the plastics association over policy on bans. It said that it would remain in the plastics trade group but told the Sierra Club that it had informed its plastics industry colleagues that

some bans on single-use plastic products can be good policy because they help educate consumers.

Coke and Pepsi's withdrawal from the plastics group come as the issues became much more heated in state legislatures.

Five more states this year passed laws banning or taxing bags and other plastic packaging. But on the industry side, several states passed laws in the opposite direction, limiting what their local governments could do.

Greenpeace said 15 states with a combined population of 88 million now have state laws preventing local governments from banning or taxing plastic and other packaging. Particularly in states where the Republican Party controls state governments, the debates have featured legislatures passing laws in response to some of their bigger cities wanting to ban or tax plastic bags or other packaging.

Patty Long, the interim head of the Washington-based plastics association, criticized the environmental groups.

"We are aware of several prominent brands that are members of the association have been targeted by a persistent Greenpeace activist campaign to pressure them to leave our association," Long said in a statement. "This is unfortunate — consumer brands are integral to making sustainability commitments into realities, by working with their suppliers to make last change.

"For example, our members work together to align their efforts to put recycling and sustainability at the forefront of their businesses," she said. "Once again, we invite Greenpeace to work with us to help implement meaningful and sustainable advances to improve our environment, such as modernizing and expanding recycling infrastructure."

The plastic bag industry's trade group, the American Progressive Bag Alliance, said pressuring companies to leave Long's group would not impact APBA policies. APBA is a self-funded group within the Plastics Industry Association.

"These activists are barking up the wrong tree because they fail to understand that the APBA is an independently funded group with zero dollars contributed by Plastics [as the Plastics Industry Association calls itself] and its members," said Matt Seaholm, APBA executive director. "The massive amount of time

and resources these groups are wasting to pressure companies could better be spent working with Plastics to continue its important work on real solutions to achieve our shared goal of reducing plastic waste."

But the environmental groups repeated their calls for the industry groups to stop pushing restrictions on what local governments can do.

"Local communities should have the right to protect and preserve their environment without corporations interfering," said Jan Dell, founder of the group The Last Beach Cleanup, in a comment made in the Greenpeace statement.

Greenpeace said the decision by the soft drink giants reflects a shift in public opinion.

"The Plastics Industry Association is desperate as governments and companies continue to realize that the tide has turned on throwaway plastics," Greenpeace said.