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Revised Law Will Reduce Balloon Litter in Virginia

Revisions to Virginia's balloon release law will result in fewer littered balloons on Virginia's beaches. The revised law, sponsored by Delegate Nancy Guy (D-Virginia Beach), takes effect on July 1, and will "prohibit the intentional releasing, discarding, or causing to be released any balloon outdoors". Violators are liable for a civil penalty of \$25 per balloon. The bill provides that if a person under the age of 16 releases a balloon at the instruction of an adult, the adult shall be liable for the civil penalty. The previous version of the law allowed the release of up to 49 balloons in a one-hour period.

"Latex balloons, foil balloons, plastic ribbons, and other balloon attachments are among the deadliest types of ocean trash," said Katie Register, Executive Director of Clean Virginia Waterways (CVW) and author of the 2021 report *Deadly Litter: Balloons & Plastic Ribbons on Virginia's Coastal Beaches*.

Balloons present a threat of entanglement and ingestion to birds, marine life, and mammals, according to Mark Swingle, Chief of Research & Conservation at the Virginia Aquarium & Marine Science Center. Swingle has seen too many stranded sea turtles and other marine animals with balloon pieces and ribbons in their stomachs.

Balloon litter often ends up between the high tide line and dune vegetation on remote beaches, which impacts nesting migratory shorebirds and sea turtles, explains Kathy O'Hara, a marine researcher who has studied how balloons and ribbons accumulate on coastal beaches. "Balloon-related litter is often the #1 most common type of debris found during our surveys," she added.

This law will not only help to mitigate the damaging impacts of balloon litter on wildlife but also mitigate the economic and property impacts caused when balloons become entangled in power lines. Research conducted by CVW and the Virginia Coastal Zone Management (CZM) Program, a network of state agencies and coastal localities, found a significant correlation between balloon litter and power outages. Up to 20% of power outages are caused by released balloons, impacting thousands of Virginians annually.

The revised law also prohibits the release of any balloon “that requires more than five minutes” contact with air or water to degrade. Since all balloons (latex and foil) take a great deal longer than five minutes to degrade, the law now covers all balloon releases.

CVW, Virginia CZM and its partners also conducted extensive research to better understand why people purchase and release balloons. “Interviews and surveys revealed that many people don’t understand that there is no such thing as an environmentally-friendly released balloon. There is also a powerful ceremonial and emotional aspect to releasing balloons,” describes Virginia Witmer, Virginia CZM outreach coordinator and co-author of the report, [Balloon Release Research in Virginia & Reducing Balloon Debris through Community-Based Social Marketing](#). The partners used this research to inform campaigns and a website (PreventBalloonLitter.org) that encourage litter-free alternatives to balloon releases at celebrations and memorial events.

“It is also important to note that sky lanterns are not a good alternative and are also illegal in Virginia,” said Christina Trapani, a marine debris researcher and PreventBalloonLitter.org partner, who supported updating the Virginia balloon release law. “If people celebrate with balloons, they need to know that the law now prohibits releasing those balloons,” Trapani continued.

“Thanks to CZM funding from NOAA to study this issue and create a campaign to change behavior around using balloons, organizations across Virginia, the Mid-Atlantic and around the world are signing on as partners on our website to spread the word about ways to celebrate, or memorialize loved ones, without harming wildlife,” states Laura McKay, Virginia CZM Program Manager. “We can plant a native tree or garden or blow bubbles and simply keep our balloons securely tied and inside so we keep wildlife safer and the ocean cleaner.”

Other Resources for Media:

The updated law: HB 2159 Balloons; release of nonbiodegradable balloons outdoors prohibited, civil penalty. [Summary of HB2159](#)

[PreventBalloonLitter.org](#), a website that encourages litter-free alternatives to balloon releases at celebrations and memorial events.

[Virginia Coastal Zone Management Program](#): Monitoring of balloon debris in Virginia report, [Balloon Litter on Virginia’s Remote Beaches – Results of Monitoring from 2013-2017](#)

2021 report “[Balloons and Plastic Ribbons: Deadly Litter on Virginia’s Remote Beaches](#)” by [Clean Virginia Waterways of Longwood University](#)

[Balloons as Litter](#): a problem we can solve (a website of Clean Virginia Waterways of Longwood University)