



ENVIRONMENT

THE CITY

Count Down to the Silent Spring of the 21st Century



by **John Szalasny**

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It is said that a visit to Buffalo by President Lyndon Johnson in August, 1966 directly led to the Federal Water Pollution Control Amendments of 1972 (now known as the Clean Water Act) – it was part of ground

breaking environmental legislation passed throughout the early 1970s after the first Earth Day celebration. His tour of the Buffalo River with local conservationist Stanley P. Spisiak exposed the condition of the dioxin-laden river bed, leading up to the President's pledge in Niagara Square that "Lake Erie must be saved."

More recently, research on microplastic pollution in Lake Erie by the then-SUNY Fredonia professor Dr. Sherri Mason spurred Erie County to pass a ban on microbeads in cosmetics and other products. This law served as a model for federal legislation (Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand was the primary sponsor) of the Microbead-Free Waters Act of 2015. This law is the only legislation to date to address the issue of plastic pollution at the federal level.

The issues with plastic waste have been getting headlines ever since China decided to stop importing collected recycled plastics from the rest of the world in 2017. What was once a hidden shell game, the issues with recycling were laid bare for all to see, with the documentary Plastic China (likely the cause of the import ban) showing the impacts of plastic waste on the Chinese landscape and people. Further documentaries (like PBS's The Plastic Problem) have shown the impacts of plastics throughout the world.

Now we are getting a clearer picture on the health issues of plastics. Just as the Rachel Carson book *Silent Spring* brought awareness of the effects of pesticides and other chemicals on the health of wildlife, Shanna H. Swan, PhD exposes the effects of chemicals commonly found in plastics in the book ***Count Down: How Our Modern World Is Threatening Sperm Counts, Altering Male and Female Reproductive Development, and Imperiling the Future of the Human Race***. *Already, fertility has dropped more than 50% since the commercial introduction of plastics and these chemicals, like the hormone disrupting phthalate, are literally found in everything – vinyl plastics, perfume, cleaning products are just a few. As scary as the impacts of her research are, it's just the tip of the plastic health iceberg as additives in plastics have a variety of health impacts, and plastics like polystyrene (aka Styrofoam) are recognized as a probable carcinogen.*

Buffalo has been the starting point for significant federal environmental legislation, and Senator Kirsten Gillibrand has recently signed on as a sponsor of the **Break Free From Plastic Pollution Act of 2021** which will be introduced in Congress this week. The bill has features that our local House members can and should sponsor. For Rep. Tom Reed, the bill will deal with reducing packaging waste that is currently going to the multiple landfills in his district, each of which has caused controversy in the recent past. For Rep.

Chris Jacobs, his support of multiple bills in the state assembly on common harmful chemicals (such as a ban on PFAS chemicals in food packaging) is addressed in this bill through the Designing for the Environment provision that will eliminate toxic substances in packaging. For Rep. Brian Higgins, his membership on the Great Lakes Task Force will have one less headache with the elimination of single use Expanded Polystyrene food container waste entering the lakes as well as provisions to address microfiber pollution from clothing. This promises to be a bill which will have at least as a significant an environmental impact on our region as the Clean Waters Act did nearly 50 years ago.

*Photo by **Dustan Woodhouse***

Tagged with: bans Buffalo NY Buffalo River Chris Jacobs Great Lakes Task Force
Kirsten Gillibrand Lyndon Johnson microbeads plastic pollution Rachel Carson Silent Spring
Tom Reed



Written by John Szalasny

John Szalasny is someone who cares about our planet. Born too late to join in on the first wave of organized environmental action in the 60's, I'm making up for lost time as I get nearer to retirement on various environmental concerns including the plastic waste crisis. Check out my Facebook group Bring NYC's Styrofoam Ban to My Hometown!
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/2098476837129562/>.

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