

2025 Beach Cleanup Annual Report

The Power of Beach Cleanups

From Community Building to Policy Change



Contents

03 Introduction

04 National Overview

05 Program Results

06 Plastic, Plastic, and... More Plastic

07 Tons of Trouble: 10 Beach Cleanups
That Broke the Scale

08 The Better Beach Alliance

10 Dirtiest Beach Day

11 Regional Highlights

12 Regional Impacts

13 Cleanups Build Community
and Empower Leaders

23 Science and Policy

24 Tobacco Trash is Taking Over

26 Cleanups Creating Change

28 Conclusion



Introduction

The Surfrider Foundation's Plastic Pollution Initiative aims to protect our ocean from the harms caused by plastic pollution by advocating for the reduction of single-use plastics. This includes eliminating the production of single-use plastics at the source, switching to more sustainable or reusable options, and ensuring that all remaining plastic is mechanically recycled rather than being burned or ending up in landfills or our environment.

The initiative tackles the problem of plastic pollution through both programmatic and policy efforts. The policy arm focuses on **campaigns**, which have led to **hundreds of successful plastic pollution reduction laws** at the local and state levels across the United States. Surfrider's programs include: 1) Ocean Friendly Restaurants and Hotels, which recognize and support businesses taking direct action to decrease the use of single-use plastics in the hospitality industry; and 2) the Better Beach Alliance Beach Cleanup program, which provides critical data to support our policy initiatives that reduce the amount of plastic ending up in our ocean.

The Surfrider Foundation's Beach Cleanup program demonstrates that through collective action, positive change for a cleaner future is possible. For decades, beach cleanups have been bringing together ocean lovers and introducing them to the work that Surfrider chapters and student clubs are doing across the country. Cleanup

programs build and strengthen local stewardship, educate the public, and amplify the voices of people concerned about the health of our coasts and ocean. These efforts provide the foundation of Surfrider's powerful grassroots network, capable of tackling enormous issues threatening our ocean, and have helped pass legislation to better protect our coasts from future threats. Cleanups do more than clean the beach — they bring new people into Surfrider's community, provide a hands-on learning experience about the scale and scope of plastic pollution, empower local leadership, and lay the foundation for a cleaner future for our ocean and coasts.

The seventh edition of Surfrider's annual Beach Cleanup Report not only highlights our network's cleanup efforts in 2025, but also demonstrates how plastic pollution impacts various coastal regions and reveals the items most often collected. The report explores the harms of smoking waste; because cigarette butts and their e-cigarette counterparts are the most littered items in the world, there is an ongoing need for widespread action to reduce the impacts of this toxic trash. Additionally, the report looks at the power cleanups have to create lasting change through data-informed policy action to ultimately stop the flow of single-use plastic pollution into our environment.

For more information on our beach cleanup data, visit Surfrider's **[beach cleanup database](#)**.

Cleanups do more than clean the beach — they bring new people into Surfrider's community, provide a hands-on learning experience about the scale and scope of plastic pollution, empower local leadership, and lay the foundation for a cleaner future for our ocean and coasts.

2025 Program Highlights



338,383
Pounds Of Trash Collected



34,058
Volunteers Engaged



1,058
Total Cleanups

National Overview



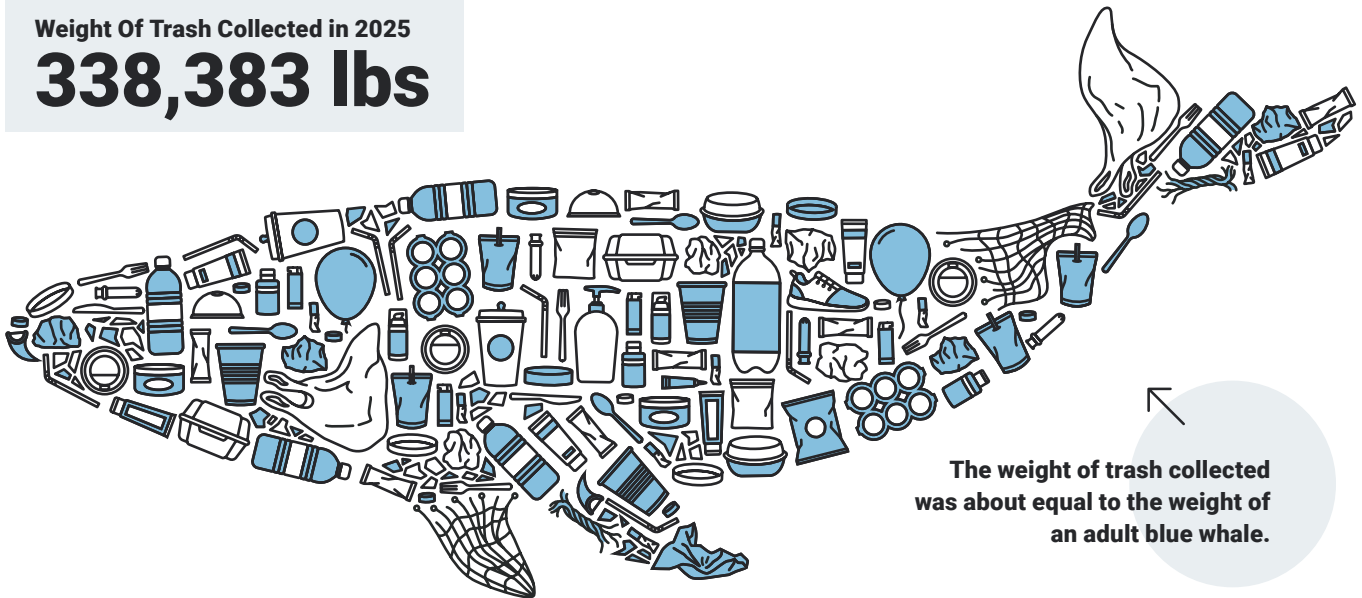
Program Results

Over the course of 2025, more than 34,000 volunteers removed nearly 340,000 pounds of trash and recyclables from America's coastal environments during 1,058 cleanups, ultimately intercepting and reducing the amount of plastic pollution flowing into our ocean. Over 800,000 individual items were cleaned up from

beaches, parks, and coastal ecosystems. These efforts result not only in immediately cleaner communities and beaches, but also in long-term reductions in plastic pollution by identifying problematic pollution trends and working to pass legislation to remove these items from circulation.

Weight Of Trash Collected in 2025

338,383 lbs



804,988

Total Items Collected



1,058

Total Cleanups



34,058

Volunteers Engaged



85%

Of All Items Were Plastic



3,245

Cleanup Event Hours



860

Miles of Beach Cleaned

The data is clear — we **cannot rely on beach cleanups alone** to get us out of this mess. We need **legislative interventions** and **industry involvement** to reduce plastic production and rapidly shift away from single-use plastic products to protect the health of our ocean, marine life, and ourselves.

Plastic, Plastic, and... More Plastic

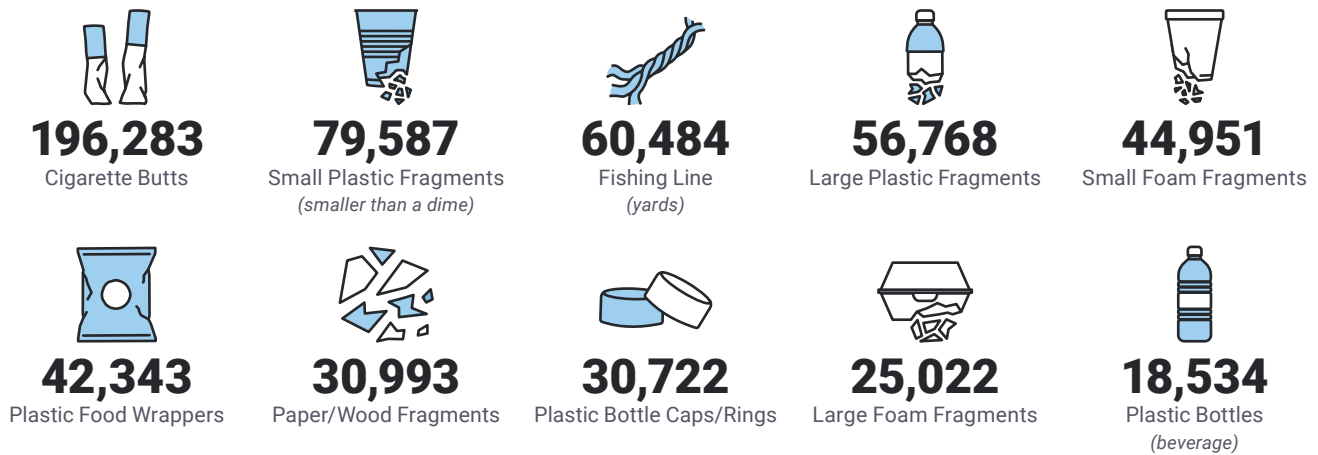
Surfrider beach cleanups help fight plastic pollution through volunteer-led data collection. Coastal advocates across the country catalog their cleanup findings and share them in Surfrider's national beach cleanup database. We then analyze the dataset to identify common items, materials, and categories of trash found.

Surfrider's beach cleanup data confirms that once again, year after year, plastic pollution is an enormous, pervasive threat to our coasts and ocean. In 2025, plastic was the number one material found during Surfrider beach cleanups, accounting for 85% of all items cataloged. That means that in 2025 alone, over 685,000 pieces of plastic were cleaned up from the environment. Furthermore, nine of the top ten items collected during Surfrider beach cleanups were made from plastic. While staggering, this is unfortunately not surprising since around **11 million metric tons** of plastic pollution enter our ocean every year — the equivalent of dumping nearly two garbage trucks full of plastic into the ocean every minute.

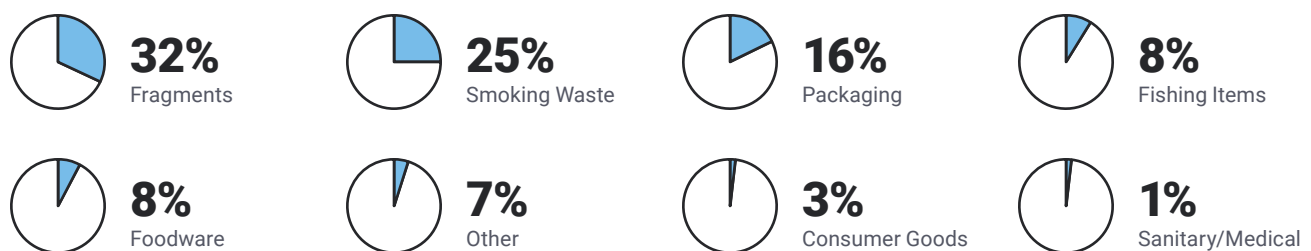
Plastic pollution data from coastal zones can tell us more than just what types of plastic trash are found. It also shows how plastic behaves once it enters the environment, breaking down into smaller and smaller pieces. In 2025, 25% of all items found during cleanups were plastic fragments, meaning Surfrider volunteers removed over 200,000 individual pieces from our beaches, of which 60% were fragments smaller than a dime. Fragments are already challenging to clean up, and the smaller they get, the bigger threat they become as microplastics to our beaches, human health, local ecosystems, and wildlife.

The data is clear — we cannot rely on beach cleanups alone to get us out of this mess. We need legislative interventions and industry involvement to reduce plastic production and rapidly shift away from single-use plastic products to protect the health of our ocean, marine life, and ourselves.

Top Ten Items Collected



Broad Usage Categories



Tons of Trouble: 10 Beach Cleanups That Broke the Scale

Surfrider chapters and student clubs remove hundreds of thousands of pounds of trash from our beaches and coasts each year. The average weight of trash collected per cleanup in 2025 was 300 pounds. However, many of Surfrider’s beach cleanups yield much higher weights due to the immense amounts of trash on our coasts. Whether it’s a few pieces of large, heavy debris or an accumulation of smaller pieces of plastic, the staggering amount of trash that Surfrider has removed shows that our volunteers are bearing the burden of cleanup efforts. We are calling on local governments and municipalities to find collaborative solutions to these pollution problems because we can’t beach cleanup our way out of this.

Each of these ten cleanups was a *single-day* event that removed at least 1,000 pounds of trash. This list, while not inclusive of every large cleanup, demonstrates that enormous amounts of trash are polluting beaches across the country and shows the strength of Surfrider’s grassroots network working tirelessly to clean up beaches coast to coast.

Cleanup Details	Weight of Trash Removed
Ocean Shores, WA July 5, 2025	26,200 lbs
Twin Harbors State Park, WA July 5, 2025	4,240 lbs
San Gabriel River, Coyote Creek, CA June 1, 2025	3,340 lbs
Anahola Bay, Kaua’i, HI January 19, 2025	3,202 lbs
Nukoli’i Marine Camp, Kaua’i, HI June 8, 2025	2,402 lbs
Ormond Beach and Wetlands, CA April 19, 2025	2,060 lbs
Seal Beach, River’s End, CA Oct 26, 2025	1,883 lbs
San Jose Island, TX May 10, 2025	1,410 lbs
Ski Beach, Ventnor City, NJ May 3, 2025	1,315 lbs
James Island Connector, SC April 8, 2025	1,000 lbs

The **average weight of trash collected per cleanup is around 300 pounds.** However, many of Surfrider’s beach cleanups yield much higher weights due to the immense amounts of trash on our coasts.



The Better Beach Alliance

Marking the eighth year of REEF's presenting sponsorship of Surfrider's national beach cleanup program through the Better Beach Alliance, 2025 also saw a new official sponsor join. Costa is now helping to grow the impact of this important work to keep our beaches clean. This alliance encourages everyone — individuals, organizations, and businesses — to play an active role in protecting our coasts and to recognize that actions big and small can contribute to the movement to end plastic pollution.

REEF's foundational support of the national scale and growing impact of Surfrider's Beach Cleanup program has materialized in removing over 2.5 million pounds of trash and plastic pollution through over 22,000 beach cleanup events carried out by over 600,000 volunteers.

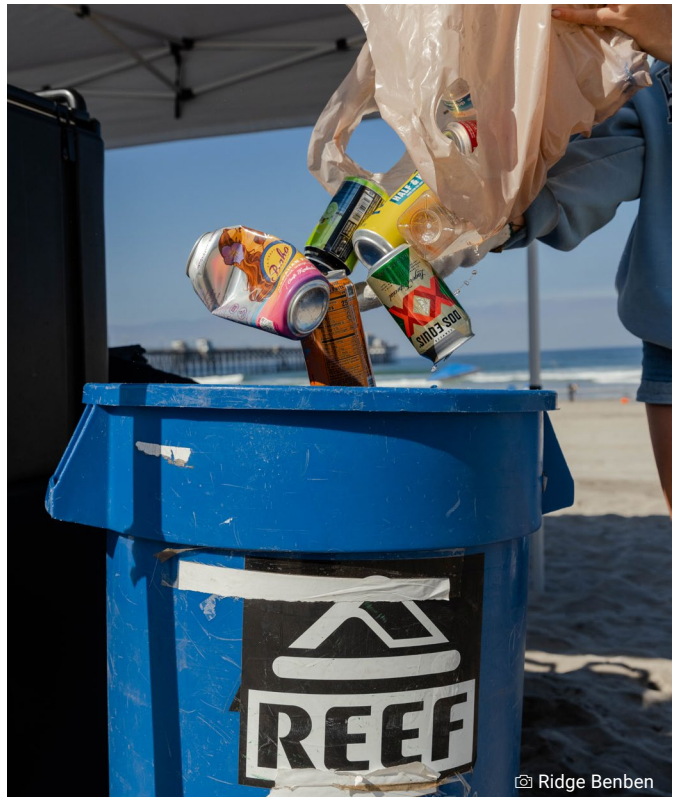
Shea Perkins, who leads Culture & Impact at REEF, shared, "Partnering with Surfrider reflects REEF's commitment to showing up for our ocean communities in meaningful ways. Together, we've been able to turn shared values into tangible environmental action, and we're proud to continue evolving our partnership to create lasting impact through accountability, adaptability, and stewardship."

Surfrider is proud to continue our partnership with REEF for this important alliance and our corresponding plastic pollution initiative. Year after year, REEF has continued to support Surfrider's efforts, whether that be through engaging the community with our Found Objects Photo Contest or funding our national beach cleanup database that we use to strengthen our policy advocacy to reduce single-use plastic pollution.

REEF's foundational support of the national scale and growing impact of Surfrider's Beach Cleanup program has materialized in removing over 2.5 million pounds of trash and plastic pollution through over 22,000 beach cleanup events carried out by over 600,000 volunteers.



The graphic features the logos of the Surfrider Foundation and REEF at the top. Below them is the 'BETTER BEACH ALLIANCE' logo, which includes a shield with a palm tree and waves. Underneath the alliance logo, it says 'SUPPORTED BY: COSTA' with the Costa logo. At the bottom, a text block reads: 'Launched in 2018, the Better Beach Alliance was founded by the Surfrider Foundation and REEF to expand the impact of Surfrider's Beach Cleanup program and amplify the amount of trash removed, volunteers engaged and events hosted.'



© Ridge Benben

There were many key moments of collaboration and impact alongside our BBA partners in 2025. With Costa's sponsorship of the program, we focused our on-the-ground efforts on International Coastal Cleanup Day, the nation's largest day of volunteerism, with a series of beach cleanups from coast to coast. Through this campaign, we collectively engaged 450 volunteers and removed 470 pounds of trash from our coastline, all emboldened by Costa's mantra to "Kick Plastic."

Trevor McGowen, Costa's Senior Brand Director, shared, "Our longstanding partnership with the Surfrider Foundation reflects our shared commitment to protecting the watery world. Through Surfrider's Better Beach Alliance, highlighted in this 2025 Beach Cleanup Report, Costa and Surfrider chapters from California to Massachusetts hosted coast-to-coast cleanups. Costa extends our deep appreciation to those who dedicate their time and energy to help Kick Plastic."



Dirtiest Beach Day

When it comes to celebrating the country's birthday, Americans go big. People head outdoors in droves to their local beaches, lakes, and parks to raise a glass (or aluminum can) in honor of the United States. Unfortunately, these celebrations have become more than simply a fun time outside — we are now seeing our treasured natural spaces become dumping grounds for people's post-celebratory trash. In fact, so much trash is consistently left behind from the holiday on our beaches that Surfrider has designated the fifth of July the "Dirtiest Beach Day of the Year."

On July 5, 2025, Surfrider chapters across the country removed nearly 55,000 pounds of trash across more than 50 cleanup events — the most cleanups ever held after the holiday! With cleanups spanning 14 states, we've grown our cleanup efforts on the fifth of July to tackle the immense amount of trash left behind.

As much as we love cleanups, they aren't the solution to holiday litter. We are working to educate the public and encourage people to make more responsible and sustainable choices. From championing a "pack it in, pack it out" mentality, to choosing reusables over single-use plastics, to educating people about firework debris, Surfrider knows that the best celebrations are the ones that keep our shared natural spaces clean and protected, so we can enjoy them again, year after year.

We are incredibly grateful to all of the Surfrider chapters and partners who worked diligently to clean the mess left behind on our beaches across the country after the Fourth of July. Surfrider remains committed to protecting our favorite places and hopes that through community-led education and advocacy, we can all enjoy our future celebrations in a more sustainable and single-use plastic-free way.

On July 5, 2025, Surfrider chapters across the country removed nearly 55,000 pounds of trash across more than 50 cleanup events — the most cleanups ever held after the holiday!



© Alex Markow

Regional Highlights



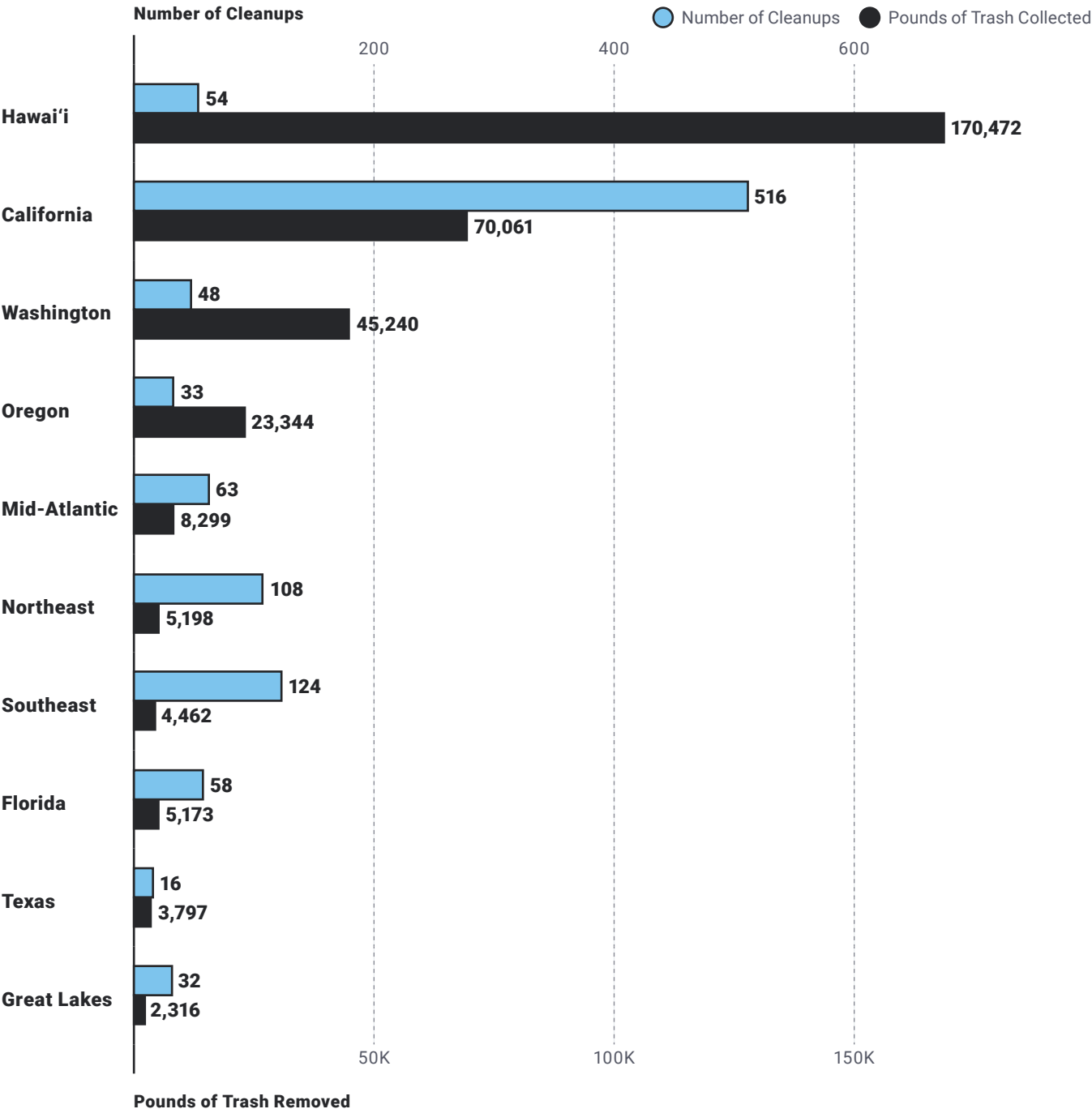
Regional Impacts

The Surfrider Foundation's grassroots network of chapters and student clubs serves as the first responders to local threats on our coasts. With more than 250 chapters and student clubs nationwide, Surfrider volunteers work within their communities to create and lead meaningful change.

Why does Hawai'i have so much more trash in weight?

Due to ocean gyres, large-scale marine debris — including discarded fishing nets — wash up on the shores of Kaua'i. These nets can weigh thousands of pounds each, leading Surfrider Kaua'i to launch **Net Patrol**, a program to address discarded fishing nets on the Kaua'i coast.

Cleanups and Total Weight Collected by Region



Cleanups Build Community and Empower Leaders

Beach cleanups are an incredible tool to build community by bringing people together for a cause we can all support — clean beaches. By creating welcoming spaces, working with like-minded organizations, and establishing exciting partnerships, Surfrider cleanups show that the beach belongs to everyone.

For Surfrider volunteers, beach cleanups are one of the most popular entry points to activism. Cleanups are often people's first encounters with Surfrider, and those experiences leave a lasting impression.

We caught up with several chapter and student club leaders to learn about their stories, celebrate their efforts, and hear about how cleanups empower them and others to get more involved in protecting our coastline.

Lucy Mogan, Marin Chapter

I first heard of Surfrider when I was at UC Santa Barbara studying environmental science. From a young age, my parents took me and my brother camping, to the beach, on hikes, and other outdoor activities. We went on walks around the neighborhood with bags and trash pickers to make sure all the trash didn't end up in the watershed or harming wildlife. This was all ingrained into my head as a young kid, so it's fitting that I am now helping to run beach cleanups in Marin County.

Beach cleanups are so much more than just picking up trash — it's a reason to get outside and spend time with the people you love. Additionally, beach cleanups show the next generation what stewardship looks like and how to sustainably enjoy our coasts and ocean.

By creating welcoming spaces, working with like-minded organizations, and establishing exciting partnerships, Surfrider cleanups show that the beach belongs to everyone.



Brooke Kaufman, Seattle Chapter

I joined the Surfrider Seattle Chapter in April 2023 as the beach cleanup coordinator! I am originally from San Diego and have participated in many beach cleanups over the years. In Seattle, we have expanded the Beach Cleanup Program to include walking cleanups along our local trails and pathways. We are fortunate to live along the Puget Sound and Lake Washington, which gives us access to a multitude of beautiful and diverse beaches and parks to host our volunteer events.

Our chapter coordinates cleanups for community members and corporate partners to engage with Surfrider's mission and understand how pollution and climate change are impacting our local waterways and recreation spaces. What I most appreciate about our cleanups is seeing how the simple act of picking up trash can inspire someone to take on a more active role in protecting and preserving our ocean, coastlines, and freshwater ecosystems.

Sara Faris, Kenai Peninsula Chapter

Beach cleanups are important to me because we spend so much time outside and it feels good to take care of the spaces we are so fortunate to work and play in. In a town like Homer, Alaska, which hosts lots of visitors and supports so many amazing outdoor recreation opportunities, it is a great way to take care of our community. We can do our part to ensure our beaches remain beautiful and safe spaces for locals and visitors alike. Stewardship is something that really resonates with Alaskans as we live in a place with such a rich cultural history and deep connection to the land; it's really great to be able to honor that in small ways like cleaning up the beach.

In a town like Homer, Alaska, which hosts lots of visitors and supports so many amazing outdoor recreation opportunities, it is a great way to take care of our community.



Allison (Harper) Wilbricht, Frank W. Cox High School Club, Virginia Beach, VA

Cleanups are important to me because they allow me to directly make a positive impact on the environment I care about. When I first learned about Surfrider's mission, I knew it was something I wanted to be a part of. Every piece of trash removed from the beach helps protect marine life and keeps our environment healthier. Cleanups also remind me that everyone has a role in taking care of the places we enjoy. It's rewarding to watch a beach become cleaner and know that our efforts are helping preserve its natural beauty. I also love meeting other people who are passionate about protecting the environment and working together toward a common goal.

Brittany Rennison, Eastern Long Island Chapter

Being a landlocked ocean lover my entire life, Surfrider was an organization I was well aware of and had dreams of being a part of one day. After my nature-enthused soul had its fill exploring the Rocky Mountains in Colorado, my journey brought me back home to New York; but this

time, to Eastern Long Island. I was so eager to jump in and get involved that I contacted the Chapter Manager, Brody, before I even left Colorado. Fast forward to today, and I now proudly wear the badge of 'Beach Cleanup Coordinator' for the Eastern Long Island Chapter.

Not only was finally joining a Surfrider chapter a fulfilled dream, but it also helped me establish a sense of community. Moving across the country to a new place where I didn't know anyone was scary — but less scary when I got involved with an organization doing stuff I am passionate about. At first, planning and attending cleanups felt a little like jumping into the deep end, not knowing how deep or cold the water is. Instead, it's been an eye-opening and heartfelt experience. Organizing cleanups has helped me learn so much about the East End of Long Island, being able to meet and connect with like-minded community members, and be a part of something much bigger than myself. Who would've thought picking up trash on the beach with strangers would leave such a meaningful impression?



Robert Kaefer, Cape Fear Chapter

I was a teacher and ocean lifeguard on Long Island for thirty years before moving to Wilmington, North Carolina. I taught marine biology and environmental science and stressed the impact of pollution, especially plastic pollution, in our environment. I tried to instill the idea of stewardship in my students, as well as my fellow lifeguards. After moving to Wilmington, I learned of Cape Fear's Surfrider chapter and regularly attended beach cleanups, which led to me taking over the position of Beach Cleanup Coordinator.

I had a habit of picking up at least seven pieces of trash every time I visited the beach, which I challenged my students and friends to do. If every person who visits the beach did the same, the impact would be tremendous. Keeping trash off our beaches obviously makes them more aesthetically pleasing, but, more importantly, helps make them safer for wildlife and ourselves.

In my role with the Cape Fear Chapter, I have met so many like-minded individuals, many of whom I now call friends. It gives me a sense of pride that we have such a large group of individuals that are willing to donate their time to help keep our beaches clean. But the aspect of our cleanups that I love the most is seeing the kids cleaning up alongside their parents and grandparents (mine included) and knowing we are creating generations of individuals that care about their environment.



Aditi Crosby, South Bay Chapter

I started volunteering with the South Bay Chapter because my daughter volunteered with the same chapter as a Blue Water Task Force student leader for six years. After she left for college, I found myself with more free time and wanting to fill that void in our chapter somehow. Over the six years that my daughter was involved, I learned about the variety of ways that Surfrider protects our beaches and advocates for our communities. I wanted to be an active part of that, rather than just an observer.

We do cleanups for so many reasons. We live in a beach community, so we want to enjoy our neighborhood. We also want to keep everyone safe, especially our sea life and other vulnerable populations. The ocean and beaches of California are not only nice to look at and enjoy, but are also a vital part of our economy.

It's so impactful to meet people of various ages who come to our cleanups and are genuinely thankful that we are creating this opportunity for them. I'm really enthusiastic when I see groups of kids from elementary school through college at our cleanups. I love to welcome these future Surfrider volunteers and leaders! I also love speaking with the volunteers who show up to clean the beach and letting them know about all of the ways we can help improve our beach community and advocate for policies that protect us all. Overall, I love leaving the cleanup feeling more positive and hopeful than when I arrived.



Marcy Melville, Kenai Peninsula Chapter

Cleanups help build community because they are a great accessible option for many people and families to get involved with Surfrider. Here in Alaska, we are still working on building up community awareness about Surfrider's mission; part of that means being out on the beach once a month, rain or shine. We've done beach cleanups in below-freezing temperatures, gusting winds, and even active snowfall.

But with consistency comes results! We've had many attendees that have been able to join us for one cleanup and then leave for four months to go fishing. Though that seems like a recipe for losing volunteers, we've been incredibly surprised by how often people want to participate in one of our other events half a year later and mention that very first cleanup! Cleanups are a way to get people engaged with the work we do, and also with each other. Many friendships have been formed cleaning a beach, and we expect many more to come.

Michael Capizola, South Jersey Chapter

My favorite collaboration for cleanups has been the one I created with my school district in Ventnor City. Over the past four years, I have hosted monthly beach cleanups with my middle school students. What has made these activities meaningful is how many students come out for our ocean, especially considering most of these cleanups happen during the winter months! I have watched students grow

from fifth to eighth graders through the program. One student even worked a cleanup into his birthday party plan, wherein he told his friends to meet at the beach cleanup, then they would all go out for a meal afterwards. Eighth graders often help and serve as role models for the fifth graders at the cleanups. Being able to see students encouraging each other to do good for our natural world is really inspiring.

Our hard work has not gone unnoticed. Over the past three years that we have collected data, middle schoolers have removed 4,983 pounds of trash from Ventnor City's beaches and wetlands, with 2,068 pounds from the 2025-2026 school year alone! I share all of our data with the students and with city officials using Surfrider's beach cleanup database. Last year, after picking up over 800 pounds at a single cleanup, the city commissioners recognized our students for their stewardship at one of their commissioners' meetings. That data helped us advocate for dune fencing to be put up along the wetlands in one of the dirtiest areas in Ventnor, to prevent small trash from blowing into the marshes and to hopefully discourage people from dumping large items.

Seeing how kids came out and removed over one ton of trash from our beaches and wetlands through eight one-hour-long cleanups this year is just remarkable. Watching them grow up actively helping our planet means the world to me. I am so proud of all of the good they have done and have encouraged each other to do.

Over the past three years that we have collected data, middle schoolers have removed 4,983 pounds of trash from Ventnor City's beaches and wetlands, with 2,068 pounds from the 2025-2026 school year alone!



Riley McDaniel & Ryan Diaz, Co-Presidents, California State Polytechnic University, Humboldt

In a small, rural place like Humboldt, there are naturally fewer opportunities to build community. But when it comes to protecting what we love — our beaches — our community shows up! We've been fortunate to partner with various other student organizations on campus to foster new relationships, including Delta Psi Epsilon Sorority, the Politics Club, and local organizations such as the Humboldt International Film Festival, Surfrider Humboldt, as well as other conservation groups.

We've also successfully advocated and partnered with our university to get our dining hall Ocean Friendly Restaurant certified, and our Co-President, Riley McDaniel, was nominated as the 2026 Sustainability Champion! These tangible results from our efforts have built real, actionable outcomes that promote authentic and meaningful connections to our neighbors, while also reminding our community of the value of advocacy, connection, and getting our hands dirty to show up for what matters to us most!

Ava Bjorkman, University of New Hampshire

Cleanups help build community because they bring together people who otherwise might never have met. As college students, finding community is one of the most important parts of the experience. At UNH, there's no shortage of ways to connect — going on an outing club trip if you like the outdoors or joining an intramural team if you like team sports. What makes beach cleanups special is the diversity they attract. Our Surfrider club alone is comprised of members from each college, with majors ranging from STEM to the arts. You'll find people who could not be more different from each other, yet share a common interest — protecting our oceans. That common ground has a way of bridging differences that might otherwise keep them apart.

For our UNH club, beach cleanups have become one of the best opportunities to find community. This year, a significant portion of our membership was incoming first-year students, many of whom found the basis of their friend group by cleaning up the beach. It's a reminder that beach cleanups aren't just good for the environment; they're good for people too.



Janita Madramootoo, Space Coast Chapter

Cleanups help build community because they transform individual concern into collective action. On Florida's Space Coast, that spirit took root in a new way this year with the launch of our Beach Guardian Program.

We already have an existing community of amazing members who show up month after month, cleanup after cleanup, and collaborations with local organizations bring new faces. But this year, we were able to reach a new group we knew existed but hadn't yet tapped into — community members walking the shores of the Indian River Lagoon, Turkey Creek Sanctuary, and our long stretch of the Atlantic coastline. They were naturally doing solo beach cleanups whenever it worked best for them.

Sixteen members answered our initial call for volunteers. Most had never been to a monthly cleanup. Now they're part of something larger: each other, the chapter, and the data that makes their individual efforts count.

That's what the Beach Guardian Program gave us. Not a community built from scratch, but one finally connected. Together in act and purpose. It's knowing that there is another person miles down the shore doing the same thing that makes it more than a solo effort. It makes it a movement. And our chapter couldn't be prouder to be a part of it.



© Dominic Agostini

Neil McQueen, Texas Coastal Bend Chapter

Cleanups help build community by giving us the opportunity to clean and protect all places — even hard-to-reach ones. On May 10th, 2025, our chapter partnered with the University of Texas Marine Science Institute to hold a cleanup on San Jose Island near Port Aransas. One thing that made this cleanup unique is that the 20-mile-long island is privately owned, and you can only get there on the Jetty Boat, a small ferry. Since no other cleanups are done on the island, large amounts of trash can accumulate there. Organizing a cleanup like this takes a lot of planning, and all the trash we picked up had to be carried to the dock on the island and loaded onto the Jetty Boat for transport to Port Aransas for disposal.

In 2.5 hours, 30 volunteers picked up 1,410 pounds of trash from the beach and jetty, including approximately 3,500 plastic bottles! It was a lot of work, but we all felt a huge sense of accomplishment as we threw everything into the dumpster.

In 2.5 hours, 30 volunteers picked up 1,410 pounds of trash from the beach and jetty, including approximately 3,500 plastic bottles!



Isabella DeFrancesco, Northeast Regional Manager

Our cleanups help build community because they create low-barrier, welcoming spaces where anyone can show up and immediately feel like they belong. Whether someone is attending their first event or their fiftieth, there's a shared sense of purpose, resilience, and care for both the ocean and one another.

This year, Surfrider's South Coast Massachusetts Chapter held their very first cleanup ever...in the snow! Despite freezing temperatures and winter conditions, volunteers still came out excited to be there, proving that there's real momentum and passion behind this growing community. In New Hampshire, volunteers bundled up for a cleanup that took place in below-freezing temperatures, showing just how committed people are to protecting their beaches year-round. And in Maine, volunteers traveled out for an island cleanup in the rain — embracing the weather and turning the day into a memorable shared experience instead of a reason to cancel.

Across the Northeast, our chapters regularly host cleanups in rain, wind, snow, and peak summer heat, covering huge stretches of coastline from urban waterfronts to remote beaches. Those experiences create a special kind of bond. People come for the cleanup, but they stay because they feel welcomed, connected, and part of something bigger. Many volunteers who first met at cleanups are now close friends, chapter leaders, campaign volunteers, or consistent community members.

Paula Slayton, Maine Chapter

For the past four years, Surfrider Maine has proudly partnered with Chickadeeds, a Portland-based nonprofit that organizes monthly volunteer events connecting children,

adults, and local nonprofits. Their mission — to spark connection, support community engagement, and create a positive impact on our local ecosystem — makes them an ideal partner for our chapter.

Each year, more than 100 volunteers join us for our beach cleanup event, creating an inspiring atmosphere that encourages other beachgoers and community groups to jump in and get involved. The day is filled with community spirit: donuts are shared, faces are painted, and volunteers work side by side to protect our coastline. One of the highlights of the event comes at the very end, when a dramatic drum roll leads up to the announcement of the total pounds of trash collected. The cheers that follow capture the energy and pride of everyone who participated.

This year's cleanup also introduced us to a group of students who had recently launched a Surfrider student club at their high school. We're excited to continue building that relationship and explore future collaborations together. Because many Chickadeeds volunteers are graduating high school students, these events also help us strengthen connections with young leaders and grow our college club community for years to come.

Partnerships like these remind us that environmental stewardship is about more than cleaning beaches — it's about building community, creating connections, and inspiring the next generation of changemakers. We're grateful to Chickadeeds, our volunteers, and all of the students and families who continue to show up year after year. Together, we're creating a stronger, more connected coastal community and proving that small actions, when multiplied, can make a lasting impact.



Chris Grippio, New Hampshire Chapter

In New Hampshire, we are proud to say we are 'all conditions.' We host cleanups in every type of weather as long as it is safe and people are dressed appropriately. We've been there when it was 4 below zero, 95 degrees, raining, or just plain super nice. The great thing about our super-cold cleanups and hot-weather cleanups is the commitment from so many people and organizations. We have had the good fortune to work with a few awesome groups of students and local businesses.

The University of New Hampshire club members have brought so many new participants to our beach cleanups and help to bring youthful energy and new ideas. Recently, the Dartmouth College Outing and Surf Club joined in for a cleanup. We also collaborated with a local middle school, Hampton Academy Middle School, who brought 300 students to both our fall and spring beach cleanups — inspiring young minds!

Our chapter also works with local businesses, like NOBL Beverages, who help keep our attendees caffeinated and energized during cleanups. NOBL has supported us for many years, and as a business concerned for our beaches, we love that they talk the talk and walk the walk. We collaborate with our local Ocean Friendly Restaurants, especially Common Roots Cafe, which has stepped up to provide a post-beach-cleanup hangout, handing out free coffee and discounted grinds. Our efforts require a lot of energy, whether it is cold or hot, so refueling from Common Roots Cafe is helpful.

New Hampshire folks are a hardy bunch, and more important than being tough is that the turnout helps solidify not only our beach-loving community and Surfrider volunteer friends, but also our position within it. It creates a bond between volunteers to the point that we are in it all together, whether it is in the cold, snow, rain, wind, or sun. It shows we can be counted on to get the job done and to care for our beaches. And that is what it is about — 'sea' you out there!

It creates a bond between volunteers to the point that we are in it all together, whether it is in the cold, snow, rain, wind, or sun.



Charlotte Marriott & Hannah McClintock, University of Hawai'i at Manoa

Cleanups create lasting change by showcasing how individual actions can turn into measurable environmental impacts. Here at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa Student Club, we have found that our role in our community is to provide resources to help mobilize volunteers. We've talked to a plethora of individuals who want to become involved in environmental conservation — people who want to make a change — but simply don't know how to get started.

By organizing accessible and consistent cleanup opportunities, we provide a direct pathway for community members to take action and see the impact of their efforts firsthand. Each cleanup not only removes debris from our shorelines but serves as an important educational experience that helps volunteers better understand the sources and consequences of marine pollution. An important byproduct of these cleanups is that volunteers develop a stronger connection to their local community and environment.

In addition to removing waste from our beaches, we collect and document cleanup data to identify trends in the types and quantities of debris found. This information helps us raise awareness regarding the most prevalent forms of pollution impacting our coastlines while supporting broader conversations about waste reduction and environmental stewardship. By sharing these findings through outreach efforts, social media campaigns, and community engagement, we can transform cleanup events into opportunities for education, advocacy, and long-term behavioral change.

Ultimately, our goal is not only to clean beaches but also to empower individuals to become active participants in protecting Hawai'i's environment for future generations. The photo below features one of our recent cleanups, which we hosted after Hawai'i was impacted by a series of Kona Low storms. During this event, we removed 1,132 pounds of trash.

Charlie Plybon, Senior Oregon Policy Manager

Recently, I had the pleasure of leading a group of students from Westside Village Magnet School in Bend, Oregon, for a beach cleanup. I first led a cleanup with this school back in 2009 when I was a young and eager Oregon Field Coordinator for Surfrider. Today, in my role as Senior Oregon Policy Manager, I jump at an opportunity to step away from the computer, wonky policy documents, and Zoom meetings to get my feet in the sand and directly engage in stewardship. After over 20 years of coastal advocacy, from volunteer stewardship efforts on the beach to lobbying some of the most important environmental laws and policies at our state's and nation's capitols, beach cleanups remain one of the most important Surfrider activities I engage in.

So what's the big deal with cleanups and why do they outweigh the hundreds of hours I spend each year working on laws and policies to protect the environment? Quite simply, policy can prevent pollution, but cleanups remove it. Bang, instant gratification! Trash on the beach doesn't wait for legislation, and frankly, after spending a lot of my time struggling with lawmakers and imperfect solutions, it feels good to do something about it.



Science and Policy



Tobacco Trash is Taking Over

Can you guess the most commonly collected item during beach cleanups, year after year? Cigarette butts — annually, an estimated six trillion cigarettes are smoked worldwide, and 4.5 trillion cigarette butts are littered into our environment.

Unfortunately, cigarette butts aren't the only tobacco-related item found during cleanups. Smoking waste — including butts, packaging, plastic lighters, and vapes — makes up the second most common category of trash collected, accounting for 25% of all items cataloged at Surfrider cleanups. Smoking waste is wreaking havoc on our beaches, but what can we do about the butts?

Cigarette butts pose an enormous risk to the health of our coasts and ocean for many reasons. Beyond the sheer volume of trash from littered cigarette butts, they are made of plastic, which means they cannot biodegrade but will only break down into smaller and smaller pieces, becoming increasingly harder to remove. It is estimated that the tobacco industry costs us \$25.7 billion each year in both

waste management expenses and lost marine ecosystem services, or the economic benefits we all receive from clean and healthy ecosystems, like food, tourism, and carbon sequestration.

As the public has become more educated about the health risks of smoking, people are making an effort to choose seemingly less harmful smoking options. This has led to a rise in traditional filtered cigarette alternatives, including electronic cigarettes, disposable vapes, and nicotine pouches. While sales of all tobacco alternatives are increasing, sales of nicotine pouches are rising more quickly than others, increasing 641% in a span of four years. Unfortunately, the littering behaviors long associated with cigarette butts have extended to these alternatives as well. As this is an emerging issue, there is relatively minimal research currently; but one study estimated that 500,000 disposable vapes are being thrown away daily, or 182 million per year, and one Danish study estimated that 5.3 million used nicotine pouches are littered each year.

Smoking waste — including butts, packaging, plastic lighters, and vapes — makes up the second most common category of trash collected, accounting for 25% of all items cataloged at Surfrider cleanups.



© Morgan Maassen

In addition to the physical litter, cigarette butts, electronic cigarettes, and nicotine pouches can leach toxic chemicals into our waterways and pose a major risk to wildlife through both ingestion and toxic exposure. Cigarette butts contain more than **5,000 chemicals**, 150 of which are considered highly toxic. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) classifies **electronic cigarettes as hazardous waste**, noting that nicotine can harm aquatic organisms, which is problematic, given that **nicotine pouches retain up to 63%** of the nicotine in them even after they've been used. Once these items are littered, the chemicals in them can contaminate water sources, infiltrate food systems, and harm or even kill wildlife. Smoking waste is detrimental to ecosystems, yet these toxic trash items are continuing to pollute the planet.

The solution to the complex issue of smoking waste may not be simple, but Surfrider believes that we are not doomed to a trashy tomorrow. Educating people on the societal and environmental harms of smoking waste can help to change toxic behaviors. While simply tossing

cigarette butts may seem like the norm, it is littering. Programs like Surfrider's **Hold on to Your Butt** help to spread awareness of the harms of smoking litter, clean up butts from our beaches, cities, and coasts, and provide solutions like portable ashtrays to prevent butt litter.

Taking action and raising awareness through legislative changes are the next steps in stopping smoking waste pollution. This includes cigarette filter sale bans, like in **Santa Cruz County**. Other approaches include introducing bills to ban single-use disposable vapes, like in **California**. Extended Producer Responsibility laws for tobacco companies, like in **Maine** or the **European Union**, are just some examples of legislative action that can reduce the damaging impacts smoking waste has on our communities and environment. Toxic litter from smoking is costing us all — both financially and environmentally. That's why Surfrider is working through education, action, and legislation to help make the harms of smoking waste become a thing of the past.



Programs like Surfrider's **Hold on to Your Butt** help to spread awareness of the harms of smoking litter, clean up butts from our beaches, cities, and coasts, and provide solutions like portable ashtrays to prevent butt litter.

Cleanups Creating Change

Just because an item is a prominent source of pollution doesn't mean it needs to stay that way. The Surfrider Foundation is confident that community engagement, behavior shifts, and policy solutions can reduce the amount of smoking waste found on our beaches — because we have done it before with other single-use plastic items, like plastic bags and takeout foodware. Commonly found trash items provide motivation to create long-term change through legislation to keep our beaches clean. Simply put, beach cleanups do more than simply clean a beach on a given day — the data collected has the potential to create meaningful change.

Ban the Bag

Single-use plastic bags used to be found nearly everywhere in our natural environment! Historically, they were one of the most commonly found items during Surfrider beach cleanups. One 2009 study estimated that 100 billion single-use plastic bags were used annually

in the United States. Plastic bags are largely unrecycled, which means most bags end up in landfills, where they may take up to a thousand years to degrade, or in the environment, where they can be ingested by animals that mistake them for food.

The first plastic bag law in the United States was enacted in San Francisco in 2007. A slew of local bans followed, with California passing the first statewide ban in 2014. Now, there are approximately 600 local and statewide plastic bag laws across the country. While they may not be perfect, they are working. A recent study found that plastic bag bans and fees have reduced plastic bag litter by 25-47%. Additionally, consumer habits are evolving alongside these policy changes, and more and more people are making a habit of using reusable bags. We expect even more of a decrease in plastic bags as more policies are passed across the country, consumer behaviors shift, and bag laws are further strengthened.

A recent study found that plastic bag bans and fees have reduced plastic bag litter by 25-47%.



Skip the Stuff

Single-use foodware is consistently one of the top categories of items found littering our coasts, accounting for 8-10% of all items collected during Surfrider's beach cleanups each year. Supporting the fact that foodware is a major source of pollution, one [San Francisco-based survey](#) found that 67% of the litter on Bay Area streets consisted of food and beverage packaging.

Building support in the fight against single-use plastics, including single-use foodware, starts with building community. Surfrider's [Ocean Friendly Restaurants](#) (OFR) program is exemplifying what a plastic-free future can look like — one meal at a time. By requiring restaurants to use reusable foodware for all on-site dining and offering disposable foodware only upon request, OFRs are leading by example in cutting out excess single-use waste.

To further reduce disposable foodware, Surfrider and our partners are making great strides through "Skip the Stuff" policies. These bills aim to change consumer expectations for takeout and delivery orders by requiring customers to opt in to receive accessories like utensils, condiments, and napkins, rather than receiving them automatically. In 2023, New York City passed a [monumental Skip the Stuff](#) bill. New Jersey followed, [passing a statewide bill](#) in 2026. Skip the Stuff policies [represent a large share](#) of single-use plastic reduction policies, with approximately 100 local and statewide Skip the Stuff policies enacted across the country, with more to follow. Not only can Skip the Stuff help reduce the amount of foodware ending up on our beaches, but it is also helping to [save businesses money](#) — a win for everyone! Through Skip the Stuff, reusable foodware policies, and our Ocean Friendly Restaurants, we're working toward making reuse mainstream.

These bills aim to change consumer expectations for takeout and delivery orders by requiring customers to [opt in to receive accessories like utensils, condiments, and napkins](#), rather than receiving them automatically.



Conclusion

Beach cleanups do more than clean the beach — they bring people together, empower communities, and help inform policies that have a lasting impact on our coasts. Over the last decade, Surfrider has proven itself as a leader in fighting plastic pollution. From engaging thousands of volunteers who collect hundreds of thousands of pounds of trash annually on our coasts to passing strong legislation that reduces single-use plastic pollution, our work in 2025 shows the true strength and potential of what can happen when communities, businesses, and governments work together.

Smoking waste remains a serious threat to our ocean and beaches. With billions of cigarette butts littered each year and a rise in smoking alternatives such as vapes and nicotine pouches, the problem is only growing. Aside from being a litter problem, smoking waste can leach toxins

into waterways, harming coastal ecosystems and killing wildlife. Fortunately, we aren't doomed to a trash-filled tomorrow. Surfrider's work to educate the public, engage communities and businesses, and pass legislation around single-use plastic bags and foodware serves as proof that cleanups create meaningful change. We are confident that through the power of our grassroots network, smoking waste and other forms of plastic pollution can become a thing of the past.

This work for our healthy beaches would not be possible without Surfrider's Beach Cleanup program supporters, including the Better Beach Alliance partners, chapter and club leaders, participating businesses, and all of the volunteers that donate their time and energy. Together, we will keep fighting to achieve a single-use plastic pollution-free future for our ocean and coasts.

Surfrider's work to educate the public, engage communities and businesses, and pass legislation around single-use plastic bags and foodware serves as proof that cleanups create meaningful change.



© Alex Markow



SURFRIDER
FOUNDATION.

Surfrider.org

Supported by:

