Data counts! The importance of showcasing locally collected data during the legislative process: Maui County’s Polystyrene Foam Bill 127

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Marine debris (from the Pacific Ocean and locally) is prevalent in the Hawaiian Islands (USA), especially where our study site is located: Kaʻehu, Maui.

To help restore this culturally and ecologically important area, we’ve spearheaded Kaʻehu beach cleanups on the 4th Sunday of every month since July 2012.

Community members and vacationers help remove the marine debris from this bay and then we categorize and count each item.

Items are reused, recycled, upcycled, or landfilled.

Marine debris items collected from 40 Kaʻehu Cleanups (2012-2017)

A similar Hawai’i County Bill 13 passed on September 20, 2017 (effective July 1, 2019).

State Senate Bill 2498 to ban polystyrene foam moved to the House on March 5, 2018.


The process of legislatively managing polystyrene foam was initiated in 2009 by Council Member Mike Victorino and eventually championed by Elle Cochran.

A statewide community-based movement began with multiple grassroots endeavors.

The American Chemistry Council launched a “Don’t take our plate lunch” campaign.

A task force met for years and compiled background research, ordinance examples, testimonies, and price lists for comparable products to show the "economic hardship for small businesses" argument was often invalid.

There was a lot of confusion concerning polystyrene, expanded polystyrene and Styrofoam and what products would be affected by this bill.

Special sessions plus an 8-person expert panel were convened.

I presented our Kaʻehu data that showed polystyrene foam items were 9% of what we’ve removed at Kaʻehu to date, 3-8% from 3 other Maui sites (Blickley et al. 2016 Marine Pollution Bulletin 105) and 15% from the island of Kahoʻolawe (King, unpublished data).

Public oral and written testimonies overwhelmingly supported this bill, and the councilmembers responded by voting for it unanimously.

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Data = Action

It’s a significant time commitment, but it’s highly encouraged to incorporate regular data collection into cleanups to provide your legislative process and others worldwide with the information needed to create positive change.

Continuing to collect cleanup data consistently before and after these bills go into effect will essentially show the success of these bills.