University of Hawaii at Manoa

Environmental Center
Crawford 317 • 2550 Campus Road
Honolulu, Hawaii 96822
Telephone (808) 948-7361

RL:0879

HB 2678
RELATING TO POLLUTION

Statement for House Committees on
Planning, Energy and Environmental Protection
Health
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By
Jacquelin N. Miller, Environmental Center
John T. Harrison, Environmental Center
Sheila Conant, General Science

HB 2678 would amend HRS Section 339-3 by adding helium-filled balloons to the definition of litter. The bill would also direct that public awareness programs of the environmental effects of helium-filled balloon litter be developed. Lastly, the bill amends HRS Section 708-829 by the offense of criminal littering to include the release of ten or more helium-filled balloons into the atmosphere.

Our statement on this bill does not represent an institutional position of the University of Hawaii.

In our previous testimony on a related bill in the 1989 legislative session we pointed out the hazards to various types of biota such as sea birds, marine turtles, and even monk seals and whales when they mistakenly ingest rubber or foil balloons. Specific reports have documented this problem. While we are certainly concerned with the hazard to marine life and birds that the release of large numbers of helium-filled, rubber or latex balloons presents, there is another aspect of this issue that should be given equal consideration.

The cost of beach, park, and street cleaning and maintenance of other public areas is a direct result of the volumes of litter produced. The volume and problem of litter pollution in the state has been recognized in the introduction of several litter related bills and the testimony by state departments, conservation organizations, and the University. The release of large numbers of balloons is a source of litter, albeit they may not impact the state directly since most of them undoubtedly find their way to the ocean, their real damage may be in the message they convey to the public. That message is that littering, on a grand scale, is acceptable if done for

a celebration or worthy cause and that somehow it is not littering because it is obviously condoned by the state. From this rationale, it is easy to see how one could then conclude, if its permitted to release 10,000 items (balloons) into the environment whey worry about a single can, sack, or styrofoam cup.

Opponents of instituting a ban on the large scale release of helium filled balloons have cited the short degradation time for the rubber or latex balloons as reason to continue the practice. We have no knowledge of the studies that have been conducted to determine degradation times in varius environments, including the sea. Perhaps it is only a few weeks. Perhaps it is much longer. The important point from our perspective is the message such a release conveys. There are alternative means of advertising an event. We suggest that alternatives to the use of helium filled balloons should be required.

As a postscript to our testimony, we urge that the following key people be contacted for specific examples of the direct impacts of helium filled balloons on marine life.

Dr. George Balazs
Marine Turtle Specialist
U.S. National Marine Fisheries
Ph. 943-1240

Dr. William Gilmartin
Marine Mammal Specialist
U.S. National Marine Fisheries
Ph. 943-1239

Dr. Sheila Conant
Sea Bird and Endangered Species Specialist
Department of General Science
University of Hawaii
Ph. 948-8241