

Speaker John Boehner
1011 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Majority Leader Eric Cantor
303 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Chairman Dan Lungren
House Administration Committee
2313 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

March 11, 2011

Dear Speaker Boehner, Majority Leader Cantor, and Chairman Lungren:

We are writing to express our deep concern with the current choice to use polystyrene products, commonly known as “styrofoam,”^{[1][1]} in the House of Representatives cafeterias. While we appreciate that the CAO is working to reduce costs, there are significant health and environmental risks associated with styrofoam, as well as additional costs associated with increased waste removal. These external costs should be considered in making the decision for cafeteria products; the desire to save a few pennies should never come at the expense of jeopardizing staff, members and visitors’ health. Over 20 years ago, McDonalds and other fast food restaurants replaced polystyrene foam with recyclable and paperboard containers. More than 100 cities have also chosen to ban polystyrene foam for health and environmental reasons. Adopting the same standard is the least we can do.

We have numerous concerns about the safety of polystyrene foam products. Polystyrene foam products can leach their component chemicals into the foods and liquids they contain. Leaching of styrene and benzene is documented with nearly 40 years of scientific evidence, as are the resulting negative health impacts.^{[2][2]} During the manufacturing process, acute short-term exposure to styrene can result in irritation to the eyes, nose, throat, and mucous membranes as well as gastrointestinal effects.

Over time, exposure to the styrene that leaches into food and liquids can cause extensive health effects, including fatigue, headaches, hearing loss, central nervous system dysfunction, difficulty sleeping, as well as low platelet and hemoglobin values and chromosomal abnormalities.^{[3][3][4][4]} The International Association for Research on Cancer classified styrene as a potential human carcinogen. Eliminating polystyrene-related health impacts will result in fewer lost work days and lower health insurance costs for the House and its staff. This benefit alone should outweigh any cost savings from using polystyrene containers.

Polystyrene foam products continue to threaten public health and the environment after they are used and discarded. Polystyrene is not easily or cheaply recycled, and there are significant health and environmental impacts from the 25 million polystyrene foam cups that are thrown away per year. When disposed of in landfills, products made of polystyrene take over half a millennium to biodegrade. While in landfills, polystyrene chemicals can leach into groundwater, jeopardizing water quality. The safe incineration of polystyrene foam requires extremely high heat in specialized plants. Incineration at normal heat levels releases over 90 different hazardous chemicals, polluting the air quality of those communities surrounding the waste plants and burdening them with increased health risks and costs.

Although we strongly support efforts to reduce costs in the federal government, it is our understanding that the cafeteria operations generate profits for the House – an estimated \$879,000 for 2010. Any costs associated with composting or any of the other environmentally sound options were always meant to be offset by these profits. Those of us who are concerned about the health and safety of Members, staff and visitors feel that this is certainly a worthwhile use for these proceeds.

The irresponsibility of the decision to use polystyrene foam without considering other options is all the more egregious because the cafeteria is not merely used by House members and our staffers. The health of constituents and visitors to the Hill who eat in the cafeteria will be impacted by this short-sighted decision. We urge you to bear in mind our responsibility to protect the health and welfare of the American public, now and in future generations, and to reconsider the decision to use Polystyrene foam in our cafeteria.

Sincerely,