

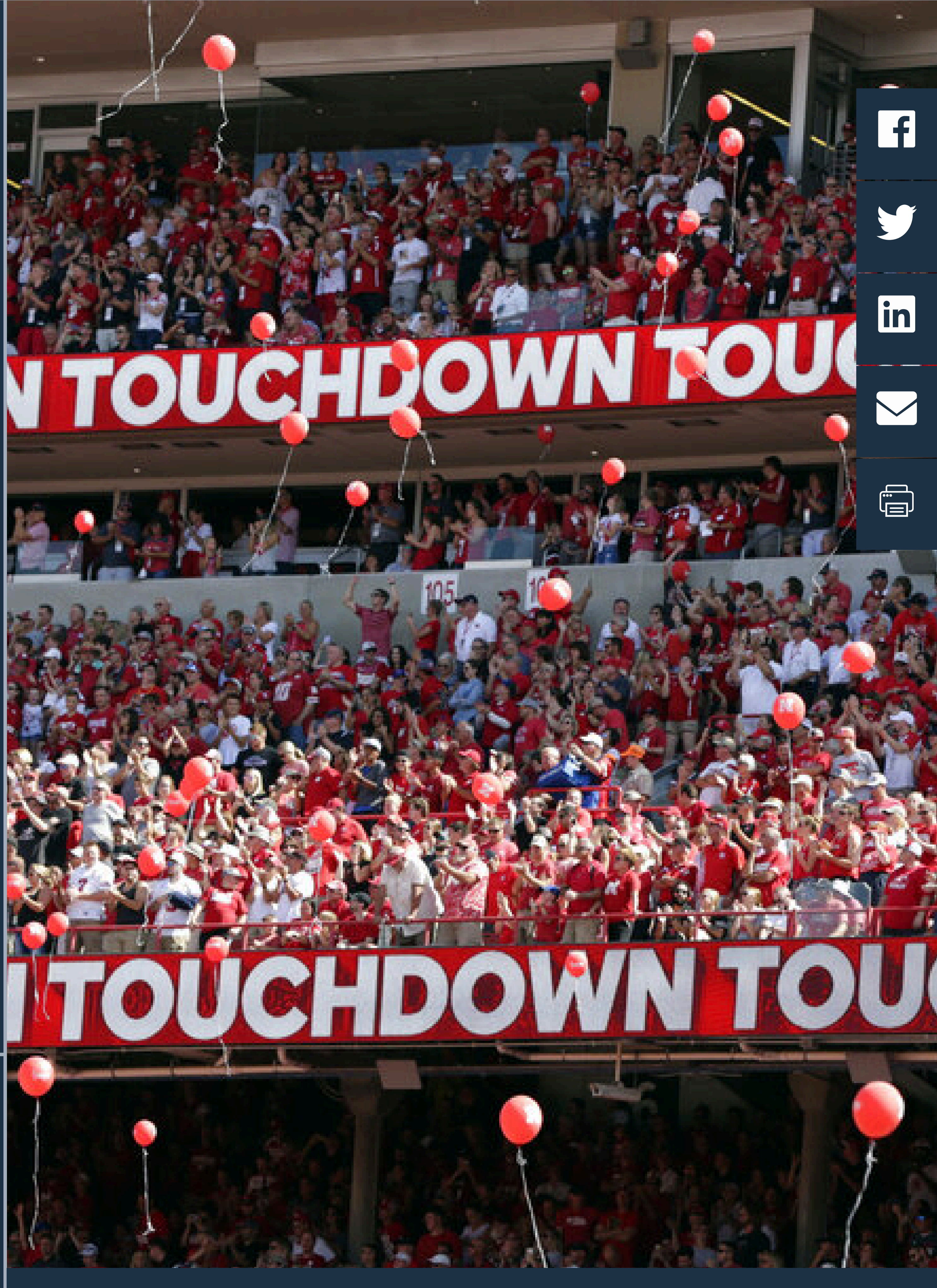
ENVIRONMENT

States let the air out of balloon litter

More than a dozen states have introduced legislation this year relating to the release of helium-filled balloons.



Humberto Sanchez 10:59 AM, Mar 15, 2025



Nebraska fans release red balloons after a touchdown against Troy during the first half of an NCAA college football game.(AP Photo/Nati Harnik, File)

Celebrating special occasions by releasing balloons filled with helium could become a thing of the past as states look to limit or ban their use to prevent litter and harm to wildlife.

More than a dozen states have introduced legislation this year relating to the release of helium-filled balloons. Lawmakers in Connecticut and Massachusetts have proposed outright bans on lighter-than-air balloons.

Legislation introduced in Illinois, Kentucky, Missouri, Nevada, New Hampshire, New York, North Carolina, Oregon, South Carolina and Texas would prohibit the intentional release of such balloons. Those bills levy fines for intentional release, though most exempt releases by children and do not apply to hot air balloons or balloons released for scientific purposes.

Cynthia Seibold, founder of Balloon Mission, a Long Island, NY-based nonprofit that seeks to educate the public about the dangers of letting balloons loose, said the problem is pervasive and can be addressed with legislation. But she said that the laws won't work if no one knows about them or the problem.

"Education is really important," Seibold said in an interview. "Balloons are a \$1.5 billion industry. People love their balloons. There's a psychological connection to them. We don't hate balloons. We hate that they're in our environment."

Balloon releases are common at weddings, funerals, sporting events, graduations and various celebrations. Seibold said an estimated one million balloons are released every year in the United States alone.

Balloons, particularly those made with a thin, foil-like plastic film like Mylar, can pose a threat to infrastructure like power lines. They can cause power outages and fires. A downtown Las Vegas power outage earlier in March caused by balloons affected 10,000 customers.

There is also a serious threat to marine wildlife.

"Balloons are one of the deadliest forms of ocean plastic," Britta Baechler, Ocean Conservancy's director of plastics research, said in an interview. "They have been documented in dolphins, sperm whales and sea turtles because they mistake balloon debris for prey like jellyfish and squid."

Seabirds are also vulnerable. "Balloons are the deadliest type of plastic that seabirds

do ingest, and are actually more than 30 times more likely to kill a seabird compared to hard plastic," Baechler said.

Ten states currently have laws limiting the release of balloons, including California, Delaware and Maryland.

Florida enacted a law last year that banned the intentional release of balloons, with the standard exceptions. The law supplanted a previous ban on releasing 10 or more balloons within 24 hours. Agricultural interest groups lobbied for the bill because balloons were killing cattle, Seibold said. The balloons get caught in hay bales fed to cattle.

Connecticut's sales ban would also supplant an existing law that bans the release of more than ten balloons. The measure was advanced by the Environment Committee late last month. But the balloon industry and some environmental advocates believe the bill is too restrictive.

Maria Stockham with the Coalition for Responsible Celebration, an industry trade group, opposes sales bans because they hurt small businesses, which tend to be minority and women-owned. She said that state bans do not reduce balloon litter because consumers instead get their balloons out of state.

"The industry opposes a ban on the sale, but we very highly endorse the ban on the intentional release," Stockham said in an interview. "That's improper product practice."

Connecticut Rep. Irene Haines (R) supports the bill banning sales of lighter-than-air balloons, given that helium, which is used in MRIs, semiconductor manufacturing and other applications, has been in short supply in recent years.

"It's not necessarily a bad idea...because it is a finite element in our atmosphere," Haines said in an interview.

But she has concerns about the measure. The legislation exempts biodegradable balloons. But even those can take considerable time to degrade while still posing a threat to infrastructure and wildlife.

Haines introduced another measure, which she prefers, that would prohibit the release of balloons. No fine is associated with the measure, similar to a bill pending in the New York Assembly.

New York Assemblymember Deborah Glick (D) introduced that bill, which would prohibit the release of 25 or more balloons in a 24-hour period.

In an interview, Glick, chair of the Environmental Conservation Committee, said that by not imposing a fine, the bill only needs to get through her committee before heading to the floor. She hopes to consider the measure in her panel after the legislature finishes work on the budget, which is currently the focus.

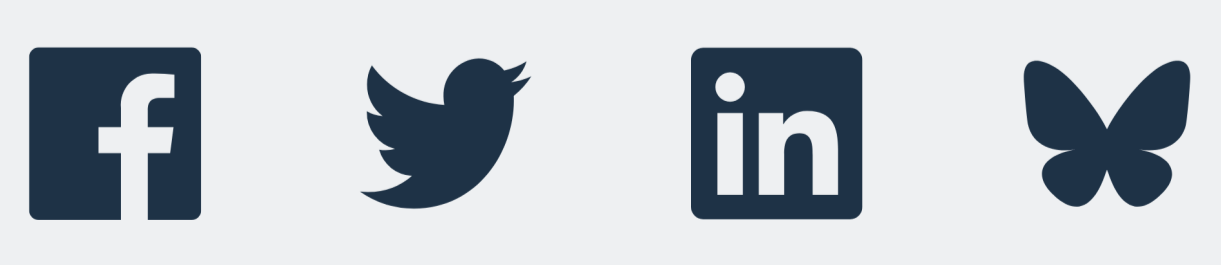
Balloon Mission and the Coalition for Responsible Celebration are working together to help enact legislation in North Carolina that would make it illegal for a person or organization to participate in a balloon release, punishable by a \$250 fine. Seibold said she is helping lay the groundwork for a bill in Tennessee that is expected to be introduced next year.

Balloon bills failed this year in Arizona, Mississippi, New Jersey.

Arizona Sen. John Kavanagh (R) said he introduced his bill to ban the release of ten or more balloons because of the litter, wildlife and cattle problem, but he pulled the plug after no one took the issue seriously. He may try again next year by changing the litter laws.

"Unfortunately, it could not get past the snicker laugh test," Kavanagh said. "People just portrayed it...so it sounded ridiculous, even though it was a large number of balloons and there were good reasons to do it."

Correction: Cynthia Seibold's name was initially misspelled.



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