



WHEREAS:

General Mills is well known for its leadership on environmental and sustainability issues and has a policy to “continually reduce our environmental footprint.” However, a growing amount of its product packaging is unrecyclable flexible plastic, a growing component of marine litter, which authorities say kills and injures marine life, spreads toxics and poses a potential threat to human health.

Plastic is the fastest growing form of packaging; U.S. flexible plastic sales are estimated at \$26 billion. Nature Valley granola bars and Betty Crocker cookie mixes in plastic pouches are examples of unrecyclable packaging. Using unrecyclable packaging when recyclable alternatives are available wastes valuable resources. William McDonough, a leading green design advisor calls pouch packaging a “monstrous hybrid” designed to end up either in a landfill or incinerator.

Recyclability of household waste is a growing area of focus as consumers become more environmentally conscious yet recycling rates stagnate. Only 14% of plastic packaging is recycled, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Billions of pouches, representing significant amounts of embedded value, lie buried in landfills. Unrecyclable packaging is more likely to be littered and swept into waterways. A recent assessment of marine debris by a panel of the Global Environment Facility concluded that one cause of debris entering oceans is “design and marketing of products internationally without appropriate regard to their environmental fate or ability to be recycled in the locations where sold...”

In the marine environment, plastics break down into small indigestible particles that marine life mistake for food. Studies by USEPA suggest a synergistic effect between plastic debris and persistent, bioaccumulative, toxic chemicals. Plastics absorb toxics such as polychlorinated biphenyls and dioxins from water or sediment and transfer them to the marine food web and potentially to human diets. One study of fish from the North Pacific found one or more plastic chemicals in all fish tested, independent of location and species.

California spends nearly \$500 million annually preventing trash, much of it packaging, from polluting beaches, rivers and oceanfront. Making all packaging recyclable, if possible, is the first step needed to reduce the threat posed by ocean debris.

Companies who aspire to corporate sustainability yet use these risky materials need to explain why they use unrecyclable packaging. Other companies are moving towards recyclability. Colgate-Palmolive recently agreed to make as much of its packaging recyclable as possible; Keurig Green Mountain agreed to make its K-cup coffee pods recyclable; McDonald’s and Dunkin Donuts are shifting away from foam plastic beverage cups which cannot be readily recycled.

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED:

Shareowners of General Mills request that the board of directors issue a report at reasonable cost, omitting confidential information, by October 1, 2014 assessing the environmental impacts of continuing to use unrecyclable brand packaging.

SUPPORTING STATEMENT:

Proponents believe that the report should include an assessment of the reputational, financial and operational risks associated with continuing to use unrecyclable brand packaging and, if possible, goals and a timeline to phase out unrecyclable packaging.