

AB 1998 (Brownley): Sack the Bag

The Problem

Californians use approximately 19 billion single use plastic bags each year.¹ However, only less than 5% of all single use plastic bags are actually recycled.² Instead, many of these plastic bags become litter and eventually end up in our oceans as marine debris.

Marine debris is ubiquitous and can be found from remote arctic regions to highly populated urban beaches.³ It is estimated that 60–80% of all marine debris, and 90% of floating debris is plastic. Plastic is so durable that it can take hundreds of years to break down at sea, and some types never truly biodegrade at sea.⁴

Plastic bags are commonly mistaken for food or prey by seabirds, marine mammals, fish, and sea turtles.⁵



Trash piled up in Ballona Creek after a storm. Photo courtesy of the CA Coastal Commission.

Taxpayer Costs

Each year, the State of California spends approximately \$25 million to landfill discarded plastic bags.⁶

The annual cost to clean Los Angeles County's 31 miles of coastline is over \$4 million.⁷



Sea Lion ingesting a plastic bag. Photo courtesy of the Whale Rescue Team.

Past and Current Solutions

Despite past efforts under AB 2449 (Levine, 2006) to require grocery stores to accept plastic bags for recycling, these programs have demonstrated little success in increasing the recycling rate.⁸ Further, current law limits the tools available for local governments to more effectively control the pollution from plastic bags, such as imposing fees.⁹ With no other options available, cities have decided to outright ban plastic bags.

San Francisco was the first U.S. city to ban single-use plastic bags in pharmacies and grocery stores. Since then, the cities of Fairfax¹², Malibu,¹³ Manhattan Beach,¹⁴ and Palo Alto¹⁵ passed ordinances banning plastic carryout bags. Some of these cities are considering the possible placement of a fee on paper carryout bags to drive the use of reusable bags.

Bangladesh, Belgium, China, Denmark, Germany, Hong Kong, Ireland, Kenya, Mexico City, Netherlands, New Delhi, India, South Africa, and Taiwan all have imposed a single use plastic bag fee, tax, ban, or a combination. Collectively, these countries represent an estimated 25% of the world's population that has committed to reducing single-use plastic bags.¹⁰

Ireland implemented a plastic bag fee to discourage the excessive use of plastic bags (the fee was increased to 33¢ in 2007). Since 2002, plastic bag use has decreased by an estimated 90%.¹¹

A Call for Urgent Action

Nine in 10 Californians say the quality of the beach and ocean is just as important to them personally as well as for the overall quality of life and economy in the state.¹⁷ California's "ocean economy" is valued at \$43 billion.¹⁸

As part of a statewide strategy to reduce marine debris and protect or valuable ocean economy, the California Ocean Protection Council in November 2008 adopted legislative recommendations to prohibit single-use products, including plastic bags, that pose significant ocean litter impacts.¹⁹

If Passed, AB 1998 Would:

- ◆ Prohibit all supermarkets, retail pharmacies and convenience stores from distributing single-use plastic carryout bags to their customers at point of sale.
- ◆ Regulate the distribution of paper bags to encourage consumers to use reusable bags.
- ◆ Does not apply to bags that are used to carry bulk items, produce or raw meat to the checkout.
- ◆ Require stores to make reusable bags available for purchase instead of distributing using single-use carryout bags.

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4. M. Gordon (2006) "Eliminating Land-based Discharges of Marine Debris in California: A Plan of Action from The Plastic Debris Project;" Prepared by the California Coastal Commission (Available at: www.plasticdebris.org/CA_Action_Plan_2006.pdf).
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6. California Integrated Waste Management Board (Available at: www.zerowaste.ca.gov/PlasticBags/default.htm) Retrieved 12/31/08.
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8. Personal communication with California Integrated Waste Management Board staff (8 Dec 2008); R. Davis, "Paper or Plastic?" *Voice of San Diego*, 2 Dec 2008.
9. Public Resources Code §42250 (b).
10. Population statistics available at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_population citing various sources, including United Nations estimates, official statistical, and census offices.
11. Ireland Department of the Environment (Available at: www.environ.ie/en/Environment/Waste/PlasticBags/News/MainBody,3199,en.htm) Retrieved 12/31/08;
12. Adopted by ballot initiative (Measure C), Nov. 4, 2008.
13. Adopted May 12, 2008; Effective December 2008.
14. Adopted July 1, 2008. Implementation of the ban has been delayed because of a lawsuit brought on by the Save the Plastic Bag Coalition.
15. Effective September 2009. Only applies to large grocery stores.
16. City of Los Angeles, Council Policy on the Feasibility of Recycling and/or Banning the Use of Plastic Bags and Expanded Polystyrene Items in the City," Adopted July 22, 2008;
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18. Kidlow, J. et al. (July 2005). "California's Ocean Economy," report to the California Resources Agency, prepared by the National Ocean Economics Program.
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