Heal the Bay

Frequently Asked Questions on AB 1998

Why ban plastic bags?

Plastic Bags Harm Our Environment

Californians use more than 19 billion plastic grocery bags and merchandise bags each year.[1] Plastic bags, designed only to be used for minutes, never degrade and last hundreds of years in the ocean. Plastic pollution can kill wildlife that mistake it for food or become entangled in it. For example, floating plastic bags in the ocean often resemble jellyfish, a common food source for sea turtles and have been found in their digestive tracts.[2] Plastic bags also cause blight in our communities.

Plastic Bags Cost Our Economy

California taxpayers spend $25 million to collect and landfill plastic bag waste each year.[3] That figure does not include external costs, e.g., resource extraction and depletion, quality of life issues, economic loss due to plastic bag litter and human health expenses. The City of San Francisco estimated that to clean up, recycle, and landfill plastic bags costs the city 17 cents per bag.[4]

The State Needs a Uniform Policy

City-by-city action has resulted in a piecemeal approach to the problem. California needs to create a uniform policy to help businesses and local governments phase out plastic bags in a coordinated manner.

Businesses Are Already Doing It

Since 2008, IKEA has ceased using plastic and paper bags at their stores and now offer reusable bags for sale.[5] Target and CVS Pharmacy have started offering incentive programs to their customers to encourage greater use of reusable bags.[6] Wal-Mart has stopped handing out free plastic and paper bags at select pilot locations in California as part of its commitment to cutting its global waste by a third by 2013.[7]

Cities Are Already Doing It

Five California cities have adopted ordinances banning plastic single-use bags and at least 20 more are considering banning plastic bags in the near future.[8] China, Mexico City and at least 40 countries and municipalities around the world have banned plastic bags (representing at least 25% of the world's population[9]).

State and World Leaders Are Calling for It

In 2008, the Ocean Protection Council called upon the California Legislature to ban or place consumer fees commonly littered items, including plastic single-use bags.[10] The United Nations Environmental Programme Secretariat has called for a world-wide ban of plastic bags.[11]

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[1] California Department of Resources Recycling and Recovery. "At-Store Recycling Program: Plastic Carryout Bags" http://www.calrecycle.ca.gov/LGCentral/Basics/PlasticBag.htm (Accessed 3/11/10).

[2] Mrosovsky, N et.al (2009) "Leatherback Turtles: The menace of plastic. Marine Pollution Bulletin," Marine Pollution Bulletin, 2009; 58 (2): 287.

[3] California Department of Resources Recovery and Recycling (CalRecycle), Available at: http://www.calrecycle.ca.gov/LGCentral/Basics/PlasticBag.htm (Accessed March 12, 2010).

[4] City of San Francisco Department of the Environment, "Bag Cost Analysis," November 18, 2004. http://www.ci.sf.ca.us/site/sfenvironment_page.asp?id=28374 (Retrieved 1/5/09).

[5] "The Results Are In: Over 92% of IKEA Customers Bagged the Plastic Bag." Press Release. IKEA (April 2, 2008). Available at: http://www.ikea-usa.com

[6] Horovitz, B. "Target, CVS Put Plastic Bags in the Bull's-Eye, Pay for Reusables," *USA Today*, Oct. 19, 2009.

[7] "No More Free Shopping Bags At 3 Walmart Stores." *Sacramento Bee*, January 2, 2010.

[8] Cities that have adopted ordinances banning plastic bags are San Francisco, Malibu, Palo Alto, Faifax, and Manhattan Beach. Major cities considering action in 2010 are Los Angeles, San Jose, Santa Monica, and Berkeley.

[9] Population estimates obtained from census offices, United Nations, and World Development Indicators 2008 population estimates. Available at: www.web.worldbank.org

[10] California Ocean Protection Council, "An Implementation Strategy for the California Ocean Protection Council Resolution to Reduce and Prevent Ocean Litter," Adopted November 20, 2008.

[11] UNEP (2009) "UNEP Head Calls for World-Wide Ban on Pointless Thin Film Plastic Bags." UNEP, Press Release, June 8, 2009.

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Why regulate paper bags?

Paper Bags Are NOT Sustainable

The production of paper bags depletes our forests and natural resources, emits greenhouse gasses, and pollutes our water with toxic chemicals used in the pulp and paper making process.[12,13]

Plastic and Paper both Need to be Addressed

AB 1998 addresses both paper and plastic to drive greater use of reusable bags and prevent consumers from switching from one environmentally harmful product to another**.**

Why not just increase recycling of plastic and paper bags?

We Cannot Recycle Our Way Out of This Problem

Less than 5% of plastic bags are currently being recycled in California.[14] Efforts to increase recycling of plastic bags by creating take-back programs at grocery stores under AB 2449 (Levine, 2007) have shown minimal success.[15,16] Despite these efforts, plastic bags are still making their way into the waste stream and storm drain systems, and often end up in the ocean.

Plastic Bags Are Very Costly and Difficult to Recycle

Plastic bags easily damage recycling equipment and jam screens used to separate materials. The City of San Jose reports that it costs them $1 million per year to repair their recycling equipment from jammed plastic bags.[17] Plastic bags cost much more to recycle, while give back little return and can cost waste haulers approximately $1,240 per ton to recycle.[18]

Paper Is Recyclable But It Is Still a Waste

Most people are aware that paper bags are recyclable but only about 21% of them are actually recycled in California.[19] Although some paper bags are made from postconsumer recycled materials that contain no virgin tree fiber, these bags are more expensive for stores to purchase relative to other paper bags, and are still designed for single-use.

Will low income individuals be forced to pay for reusable bags?

There's a Hidden Cost to Disposable Bags

Grocery stores currently embed 2-5 cent per plastic bag price and embed 5-23 cents per paper bag in the cost of food. If a ban is enacted it would save approximately $18 to $30 per person[20] which could be put to better use.

These Communities Will Actually Benefit from a Ban on Plastic Bags

Lower income communities, some of the most blighted by plastic bag litter, are already paying millions of dollars in taxes for cleanup costs; money that could otherwise go toward vital public services.

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[12] Australian Department of the Environment and Heritage Plastic Shopping Bags: Analysis of Levies and Environmental Impacts Final Report, prepared by Nolan-ITU, December 2002, Page 33; U.S. EPA Toxic Release Inventory 2006 data for Paper Industry-NAICS code 322. (Retrieved 12/31/08).

[13] The United States is the largest paper product consumer per capita. Despite advances in recycling of paper, over 40% of the industrial wood harvest goes into making paper products. Between 2005 and 2021 the global demand for paper is expected to increase by over 60%. In the United States, the paper industry is the largest industrial user of water, the third largest industrial consumer of energy, ranks fourth among industrial sectors in the release of toxic chemicals in water, and ranks third in toxic air emissions. Source: Environmental Paper Network (2007). "The State of the Paper Industry: Monitoring Indicators of Environmental Performance." Available at: http://www.environmentalpaper.org/stateofthepaperindustry (Retrieved 3/10/2010).

[14] U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, *2005 Characterization of Municipal Solid Waste*, Table 7; California Department of Resources Recovery and Recycling. (Available at: http://www.calrecycle.ca.gov/LGCentral/Basics/PlasticBag.htm).

[15] Personal communication with California Integrated Waste Management Board staff (8 Dec 2008); R. Davis Paper or Plastic?" *Voice of San Diego*, 2 Dec 2008.

[16] "Plastic Carryout Bag Program Status Update." Presentation by the California Department of Resources Recycling and Recovery, Jenneen Hartshorn, March 8, 2010. Report noted that many grocery store chains did not respond to the audit requests and results were dependent on completion of a co-mingled recycling rate study by Cal State Sacramento due out in May 2010.

[17] City of San Jose Environmental Services Division (Available at: http://www.sjrecycles.org/bags)

[18] Ibid.

[19] California recycling rate U.S. Environmental Protection Agency *Municipal Waste Study 2005*.

[20] Ibid.

Efforts Are Underway to Make Reusable Bags Available

There are already many nonprofits, food banks, and local agencies that provide reusable bags at no cost to the public. For example, for the past three years Heal the Bay has annually partnered with businesses and local governments for "A Day Without A Bag," an educational event that raises awareness about the need to reduce waste from single-use bags. In 2009, nearly 20,000 reusable bags were distributed at more than 50 giveaway locations throughout LA County, and many of those locations were in underserved communities.

What's so bad about "biodegradable" or "compostable" plastic bags?

These Bags Don't Degrade Well in the Ocean

Plastics that are compostable or claim to be "biodegradable" have not proven to degrade in the marine environment and may pose serious threats to marine life.[21] Instead, these bags require heat and bacteria, such as those present in industrial composting facilities, to completely break down into constituents that assimilate back into the environment.

Does AB 1998 ban all plastic bags?

All bags not used a point of sale, such as bags used to transport produce, bulk items, raw meat, or other items to the checkout would still be available.

What can I use for dog poop?

You can use newspaper, or newspaper cover bags, fruit and vegetable bags from the market or purchase dog waste bags.

What can I use for bin liners?

Remember, that there is already a "hidden cost" of using free disposable grocery bags of almost $30 per year embedded in the cost of goods, far outweighing the cost of purchasing a box of bin liners that will last you the whole year. Trash bags are also not commonly found as litter on beaches or in waterways.

What happens if I forget to bring my own bag to the store?

Under AB 1998, stores would still be required to provide reusable bags for purchase at the checkout. All major grocery store chains and big-box stores sell reusable totes at low costs. One reusable bag will replace hundreds of single-use bags over its lifetime.

How can I remember to bring bags to the store?

(1) Always start your grocery list with "Bring Bags"
(2) Keep a collapsible bag in your purse or briefcase for those emergency runs to the stores
(3) Keep your bags in your car trunk.

[21] California Integrated Waste Management Board (June 2007), "Performance Evaluation of Environmentally Degradable Plastic Packaging and Disposable Food Service Ware: Final Report," pp. 38-39.