

PLASTIC BAGS PENALIZED IN CHINA

Flimsiest banned as of June 1, stores must charge for thicker ones

The Associated Press

updated 1:31 p.m. PT, Fri., May. 30, 2008

BEIJING - Making good on a promise made in January, China is becoming the latest country to ban free plastic bags, part of a government-led campaign to cut down on waste and help the environment.

The nationwide measure that goes into effect Sunday eliminates the flimsiest bags and forces stores to charge for others.

Beijing has promised to hold a green Olympic Games this summer, giving extra impetus to a number of environmental policies and projects. Officials have vowed to cut down on the "white pollution" of discarded bags that choke China's cities, farms and waterways.

The China Plastics Processing Industry Association estimates the measure will reduce the amount of plastic bags used by a third from 1.6 million tons a year. The Chinese now use 3 billion bags every day, according to the group, and they are virtually indestructible, taking years to break down and commonly ending up in China's clogged landfills.

Yu Chuanjing, a college student interning at an investment company in Beijing, said he didn't have the discipline to change his habits alone.

"Of course, there'll be trouble at the beginning, but it is a good policy in the long run," Yu said while buying onions at a grocery store. "It is everyone's duty to protect the environment."

Will it work beyond Olympics?

Sun Peng, a project manager for a company that makes circuit boards, said at a fruit and vegetable roadside store that the measure is mainly for the Olympics and it will be important to see what happens afterward.

"It will be inconvenient, no question about it," he said. "But we advocated for a green games, didn't we? We can't have plastic bags everywhere."

Under the rules, businesses nationwide will be prohibited from manufacturing, selling or using bags less than 0.00098 inches thick, according to the order issued by the State Council, China's Cabinet. More durable plastic bags will still be permitted for sale by markets and shops.

"Plastic bags undoubtedly are more convenient for consumers, but at the same time they also greatly endanger the environment," Commerce Ministry official Men Xiaowei said in a rare online question-and-answer session Thursday about the policy.

He said 3 percent to 5 percent of the weight of landfills is made up of plastic waste from households, the majority of which are plastic bags.

Bags also energy users

With oil prices up more than 42 percent since December, the rule is also an attempt to cut energy use. It takes 37 million barrels of crude oil a year to make all the bags needed for China.

Owners of local fruit stalls and supermarkets said the measure would not affect their business, as they mostly only plan to charge a couple of cents for plastic bags.

Paris-based supermarket Carrefour, China's biggest retailer, said it would charge 2 to 14 cents for the plastic bags. It also sells cloth bags.

A similar ban in Ireland cut the number of bags used by 90 percent, according to Waste Watch, a UK-based environmental non profit group. Several African nations have set thickness requirements that have effectively banned the flimsy thin bags that float in the air.

In the U.S., grocers have encouraged consumers to recycle bags or bring their own, and a few states have enacted bans on free plastic bags.