

LAWMAKERS TO CHARGE FOR PLASTIC BAG USE

In Effort to Curb Pollution, California Works on Bill to Charge for Plastic Bags

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Plastic bags are so common in our daily lives that we barely give them any notice. Ubiquitous as they are, some California lawmakers believe the bags are a menace and they want to make shoppers pay 25 cents for each one they use to tote their goods home.

The California Assembly recently passed a bill that would give retailers three years to reduce their use of one-time shopping bags, both plastic and paper, by 70 percent. Beginning in 2011, shops that had not met and maintained the reduction requirement would then charge shoppers a quarter per bag.

California already has the only plastic bag recycling program in the country -- in which retailers collect used bags in bins -- and some cities, including San Francisco, Oakland and Malibu, have banned their use outright.

China banned plastic bags in January and Bangladesh has outlawed them since 2002, which might come as a surprise, given that neither country is known for its progressive environmental policies. Ireland has a similar fee-for-bags program, charging around 30 cents each.

Assemblyman Lloyd Levine, a Democrat from Van Nuys who sponsored the bill, told ABC News that reducing the number of plastic bags is good for the environment and the economy.

"Plastic bags are a huge problem, whether people realize it or not. In California, we use 19 billion plastic bags a year. You need 4,000 barrels of oil to produce that many bags," he said.

The lightweight bags take centuries to biodegrade. They end up caught in trees, strewn across beaches and stuck in drain pipes. Though inexpensive to manufacture, dealing with their cleanup costs the state millions of dollars a year, Levine said.

"The state spends \$300 million cleaning up bags -- getting them off the beaches and out of the storm drains."

Levine, who also introduced the recycling bin law three years ago, said lawmakers and citizens understand the problems plastic bags pose more now than they did then.

"I introduced the recycling bill three years ago and got a lot of pushback. At that time, only about 2 percent of plastic bags were recycled. Since then we've seen a 100 percent increase in bag recycling, but that means we only recycle 4 percent of all bags. It's either an impressive number, or still leaves much to be desired, depending on how you look at it."

In the beginning, few legislators understood why plastic bags were problematic, he added. Now, most understand they are a problem. "Now we argue over the solution," Levine said.

The problem affects California communities and the world as a whole, community activists and environmentalists told ABC News.

"The issue in California is not just aesthetic," said Mark Murray, executive director of Californians Against Waste. "The coast is facing a mandate from the (Environmental Protection Agency) to eliminate storm drain trash. These communities need to eliminate the source of storm drain trash or face the wrath of the EPA. Plastic bags gum up the works, blocking the traps and filters that clean the storm drain runoff before it goes into the bays and ocean," he said.

"The communities end up spending millions of dollars on clean up, when they can, instead, spend nothing to get rid of the bags. It is as economically sound as it is environmentally sound," Murray said.

Environmentalists say the little satisfaction that bags give consumers does not outweigh the toll they have on the environment.

One-thousand miles off the coast of California, a vortex of ocean currents forms a vast swath of sea twice the size of Texas, known as the Northern Pacific Gyre.

There is six times more plastic than plankton in Gyre, and it is permeating the food chain, said Stephanie Barger, executive director of the Earth Resource Foundation.

"There is not only more plastic than plankton, but there is plastic in the plankton, and there is plastic in the fish that we eat," she said.

She said bag use needed to be curtailed because they're inherently difficult to recycle. The 25 cent fee in California is a small price to pay compared to the expense of a clean up.

"You think you're getting those bags for free, but in nature, nothing is free. For 30 minutes of use, we end up having to destroy rainforests in Indonesia to get the natural gas, and dealing with the politics of the Middle East to get oil and then we still have the problem of the waiting more than 100 years for the bags to breakdown."

All of the Republican members of the Assembly voted against Levine's bill, which still needs to be passed the Senate and signed by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger to become law.

Republicans opposed the measure, arguing it would add hundreds of dollars a year to the grocery bills when California families already feeling the pinch of high food and gas prices. "Hard-working Californians are struggling to pay record-high prices for food and gas; the last thing they need are higher taxes," said Assembly Republican Leader Mike Villines of Fresno in a statement. "This bill will hurt families by forcing shoppers to pay a new tax on every paper and plastic bag they use at grocery stores, making grocery bills even more expensive."

Under the current bill, the fees collected will be used by the businesses to invest in local environmental projects. But according to Levine that provision is "place holder" and the bill will be re-written before being voted on by the Senate to ensure the communities control the money collected from the 25-cent fees.