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L.A. may jump aboard plastic bag ban wagon

by Sarah Mosko

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The City of Angels might soon be joining a growing web of California jurisdictions banning single-use, plastic carry-out bags.

The Los Angeles City Council had earlier expressed support for some sort of plastic bag ban, but controversy over whether a fee should be placed on paper bags — or whether they should be banned too — had slowed the process. On April 4, the council's Energy and Environment Committee recommended a gradual phase-in approach consisting of a series of six-month steps starting with a grace period, followed by a ban on just plastic bags, then next a 10-cent charge on paper bags, and finally a ban on both paper and plastic. The ban would not include the plastic bags used for fresh produce or meats.

It's not a done deal yet because the full council still needs to weigh in, but if all goes according to plan, the ban should take effect before the end of 2012.

The L.A. Bureau of Sanitation estimates that the city uses 2.3 billion plastic bags and 400 million paper bags a year and that the bag recycling rate is only 5 percent for plastic and 21 percent for paper. The rest end up in landfills or, worse still, as litter.

The Save the Plastic Bag Coalition, a group of plastic bag makers and distributors, is putting forth an all-out effort to block the spread of plastic bag bans within the state through legal challenges. On March 23, L.A. County's ordinance banning plastic bags and placing a 10-cent fee on paper bags was upheld in a Superior Court ruling. Other California jurisdictions which have enacted similar bans include the cities of San Francisco, Santa Cruz, Palo Alto, Santa Clara and San Jose in the northern region and Santa Monica, Long Beach, Manhattan Beach, Calabasas and Malibu in the south. More ban ordinances are in the works in Pasadena, Dana Point, Laguna Beach and Huntington Beach, to name a few.

A pivotal California Supreme Court decision in July 2011 eased the way for local plastic bag bans by ruling that Manhattan Beach did not have to complete a lengthy study of the environmental impact of disposable paper bags before barring retailers from dispensing plastic ones. Such environmental impact reports (EIRs) are costly to prepare, and the plastic bag industry has used them to block municipalities from enacting a local bag ban by suing when an EIR has not been filed. L.A. city plans to borrow from the EIR L.A. county used in implementing its ordinance.

Among ban supporters, there is hope that a successful ban in L.A. city will provide the momentum needed for a statewide ban.

A bill proposing a statewide ban failed in 2010, even though it was supported by the California Grocers Association on the basis that the patchwork, city-by-city bans create confusion for both stores and shoppers (AB 1998). Opponents of the ban, representing the plastic bag trade and a lobbying group for the plastics industry, had argued that a ban would cost jobs and that paper bags are just as bad for the environment because of the energy used to make them. If California had passed a ban, it would have been the first of its kind in the nation.

Plastic bag litter is not only an eyesore on land but also fouls waterways and kills marine animals who mistake the bags for food. A floating plastic bag resembles a jellyfish, which might explain why plastic bags are found clogging the digestive tracks of dead sea turtles and marine mammals like whales and dolphins. Plastic bags are a significant source of ocean pollution because, like all plastics derived from petroleum, they are non-biodegradable. Rather, they fragment over time into smaller bits of plastic thought to persist in the ocean environment beyond any meaningful human timescale.

The Long Beach-based Algalita Marine Research Foundation has been measuring the buildup up of plastic debris in an area of the Pacific twice the size of Texas and dubbed the "Pacific Garbage Patch" which, in 1999, already contained six times more plastic than zooplankton. Preliminary analysis of ocean samples collected less than a decade later indicate that the ratio of plastic to plankton has risen six-fold.

Even here right off the coast of Southern California, Algalita has found plastic debris at all ocean depths and in amounts sometimes exceeding twice that of zooplankton.

The Save the Plastic Bag Coalition has made it their business to try to debunk the environmental claims made by plastic bag ban proponents (visit www.SaveThePlasticBag.com). Even if half of what the coalition says is true, the fact remains that throwaway plastic bags are wasteful and easily replaced by reusable bags.

The pace at which local bans are cropping up all over California is picking up and hopefully marking the beginning of the end of the single-use, plastic carryout bag era.

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