

Ban plastic bags in California? It's not so hard to adjust.

It looks like California is about to ban single-use plastic and paper bags at many stores. We Washingtonians have had to comply with a plastic-bag ban since January, or else pay 5 cents per bag. I forgot the first few times. But it didn't take very long to remember my totes.



Plastic bags line a chain-link fence near San Diego in February 2009. The bags are known as "urban tumbleweeds."
(zumawirewestphotos/Newscom)

By Francine Kiefer

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It looks like California is about to become the first state in the nation to ban single-use paper and plastic bags at grocery, convenience, and other stores.

Last week, the Democratic controlled Assembly passed AB 1998, which will require shoppers to bring their own bags or else purchase recycled bags or reusable totes. It's all about controlling those "urban tumbleweeds."

Republican Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger says he'll sign the bill, but it's not without controversy. Critics cite lost jobs from recycling programs, cost, and inconvenience.

On one of those, I can offer some reassurance. It's really not that hard for consumers to make the switch.

Here in Washington, D.C., a plastic-bag-ban went into effect at food and grocery establishments on Jan. 1. You must pay 5 cents per needed bag if you don't bring your own. The tax was designed to wean consumers from the ubiquitous plastic bags and help financially support pollution-control efforts for the Chesapeake Bay watershed.

I forgot the new law the first few times, and then quickly learned to keep a balled-up plastic bag in a compartment of my purse for lunch

and convenience-store purchases. It's not a particularly elegant solution, but it works. My husband and I also store a couple of strong tote bags in each of our cars. Grocers in our neighborhood pack your totes for you.

Here's what's happened so far. Most of the time, we remember our bags. So, apparently, do a lot of other people who shop in this city.

The Washington Office of Tax and Revenue estimated that grocery and other places that sell food gave out about 3 million plastic bags in January. Before that, they gave out about 22.5 million bags each month.

That's a drastic change in consumer behavior, but also, not as much pollution-control revenue as anticipated – about \$150,000 for the month. Officials were hoping for \$10 million over the next four years (at the January rate, total revenue over four years would be \$7.2 million).

Meanwhile, I can't claim my experience to be exactly analogous to what looks to be coming in California, because neither Virginia nor Maryland, which about Washington, have a plastic-bag ban. We live very close to the Maryland line, and do our main grocery shopping there. Our preference in the check-out line is still paper-in-plastic, please, because those bags don't fall over in the car and they make good kitchen trash bags.

If the ban widens, I guess we'll have to buy our first box of kitchen trash bags in years. I wonder if anyone has figured out that trade-off?