

## Report may encourage Calif. cities to ban plastic bags, place fees on others

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PLASTICS NEWS STAFF

SAN FRANCISCO (March 9, 4:10 p.m. ET) -- A coalition of California cities is hoping that its new, detailed analysis of existing studies that examine the environmental impact of reusable and single-use carryout bags will be the weapon that cities throughout the state need to enact bans on plastic bags and place fees on all other single-use carryout bags, including paper and biodegradable bags.

"Based on the analysis, all single-use carryout bags are problematic, and the only sensible environmental policy is to discourage the use of all single-use bags and encourage the use of reusable bags," said Carol Misseldine, coordinator of Green Cities California, in a phone interview March 8 after the coalition released its Master Environmental Assessment on single-use and reusable bags.

"There are dozens and dozens of cities out there ready to implement plastic bag bans and some type of fee on all other single-use bags," Misseldine said. "We are hoping that this report can be used by local governments" to prepare the environmental impact reviews needed to assess the potential impacts of such ordinances and enable them to enact laws that withstand legal scrutiny.

Since 2006, more than two dozen California communities have tried to implement plastic bags bans, but many have pulled back their efforts because of the threat of a lawsuit. Others — such as Manhattan Beach, Calif. — have seen their bans challenged by the Save the Plastic Bag Coalition and, ultimately, overturned in court.

There are 12 plastic bag bans in the United States, four of them in the California cities of San Francisco, Fairfax, Palo Alto and Malibu. The District of Columbia also has a 5-cent tax on single-use plastic carryout bags.

Both the Save the Plastic Bag Coalition and the plastics division of the American Chemistry Council declined to comment on Green Cities' report, and the impact it could have on plastic bag legislation.

Whether the report helps or hinders communities looking at plastic bag bans may depend on how each piece of specific legislation is structured, and how legislators and courts view the findings of the assessment, which examined 65 reports and 15 life cycle assessments conducted over the last 20 years.

The reason? As one might suspect, the Green Cities analysis also found that reusable bags have "significantly lower environmental impacts" than paper, plastic or biodegradable bags, on a per use basis, provided the reusable bags are used at least three times.

But the report also found that there are environmental impacts from all single-use bags, and that, in some areas, the environmental impact from paper and biodegradable bags was worse.

"The ACC and the plastic bag industry have made a valid point that if you ban plastic bags, people will use more paper, and that, in many ways, paper bags are more problematic than plastic bags," Misseldine said.

"While plastic bags have a huge impact on marine debris, litter and wildlife, the analysis found that paper bags have a greater negative impact than plastic bags on greenhouse gas emissions, ground level ozone formation, atmospheric acidification and water consumption," Misseldine said.

In its executive summary, Green Cities California noted that "over its lifetime, a single-use paper bag has significantly larger greenhouse gas emissions and results in greater atmospheric acidification, water consumption and ozone production than plastic bags."

In addition, the results of the study indicate that biodegradable bags "are just as bad, and worse in some ways, than both plastic and paper bags," Misseldine said.

"Biodegradable bags impact marine life and litter the same as plastics and don't break down except in industrial composts,

so they are just as devastating to wildlife. And they are just as bad when it comes to greenhouse gas emissions because they release methane gas in landfills. They are clearly not the solution we were hoping they would be," she said.

The executive summary adds: "Although biodegradable bags are thought to be an eco-friendly alternative to [high density polyethylene] plastic bags, they have greater environmental impacts at manufacture, resulting in more [greenhouse gas] emissions and more water consumption than conventional plastic bags."

Still, Misseldine believes the study will enable cities to enact laws that simultaneously ban plastic bags and place a fee of 10-25 cents on all other single-use bags, because laws crafted in that fashion are likely to reduce all single-use bag use.

"We can't put a fee on plastic bags, as that is prohibited by the state legislature," Misseldine said. "So a seamless way to reduce bag use is to ban plastic bags and put a fee on all other single-use bags in order to send a signal to consumers to bring their own reusable bag.

"If we put fees at checkout counters of 10-25 cents, it will dramatically reduce single-use bags because it is a powerful economic signal that will affect consumer behavior," she said. "I believe there will be a cascade of ordinances that do precisely that."

Equally as important, she said the study will help cities defray "a significant portion" of the cost of an environmental impact report that some have estimated to be as high as \$250,000.

"It provides the scientific background on how different single-use bags impact the environment in different ways and provides up to 80 percent of the content needed for an [environmental impact report]," Misseldine said.

The study is not an environmental impact report (EIR), "but it can be used by local governments to help reduce the cost and time of preparation of EIRs by reducing the need for independent research. It consolidates in one place all the research on single-use bags and is aligned with the parameters of the California Environmental Quality Act."

An EIR must further show the local environmental impact of proposed legislation and propose alternatives and ways to mitigate that environmental impact.

Misseldine also believes the study might enable some cities to issue a negative declaration that there will be no environmental impact if the laws are designed to reduce all single-use bags through bans on plastic bags and fees on paper and biodegradable bags.

"Communities will be able to say that they are reducing the use of all single-use bags," she said.

According to the study, plastic bags account for 0.3 percent of the total waste stream in California. Of that total, grocery bags are estimated to account for 44 of that volume by weight, making plastic carryout bags approximately 0.13 percent of the California waste stream. Those numbers do not include plastic produce bags.

The study was conducted by ICF International in San Francisco.

Green Cities Coalition is group of 11 cities and one county in California focused on accelerating the use of best practices and implementing sustainability policies statewide. Members are Berkeley, Hayward, Los Angeles, Pasadena, Richmond, Sacramento, San Diego, San Francisco, San Jose, Santa Barbara, Santa Monica and San Francisco County.

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