

# Plastic bag ban moves on to Senate committee

California Government - Legislative

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FRIDAY, 02 JULY 2010 16:51

A bill banning single-use plastic bags in California passed another hurdle last week and now moves on to the Senate Appropriations Committee.

If passed, Assembly Bill 1998, written by Assemblywoman Julia Brownley of Santa Monica, would be the first bill to enforce a single-use plastic bag law. Currently only individual cities and counties can ban grocery, liquor and drug stores from providing free paper or plastic bags.

The bill aims to eliminate litter and reduce landfills by switching to reusable fabric bags. Stores will be required to offer reusable bags for purchase and sell paper bags for at least a nickel or more.

Brownley introduced AB 1998 in February, and by June 2 it had passed off the Assembly floor. The bill passed through the Senate Environmental Quality Committee earlier this week with a 5-2 vote. The bill now appears before the Senate Appropriations Committee.

Brownley did agree to one amendment of the bill, which extends the amount of time that supermarkets and large pharmacies have to provide recycling drop-off facilities for plastic bags.

Many environmental groups, such as the California Grocers Association and even the United Food and Commercial Workers, support the bill.

"The unprecedented backing of two major stakeholders in this issue – the California Grocers Association, which represents 500 companies operating 7,000 stores in California, and the United Food and Commercial Workers which represents many of their workers – significantly broadened support for the bill among businesses and municipalities," Brownley said. "These groups understood that a growing wave of communities was adopting a variety of ordinances to reduce single-use bag usage and that a uniform, statewide policy was preferable."

Currently, Californians are estimated to use about 19 billion bags per year. This breaks down to 552 bags per person, Brownley's AB 1998 legislation analysis states.

Several groups, including the American Chemistry Council, oppose the bill. They claim that reusable bags could pose more harm to consumer safety than single-use plastic bags because fabric bags can become dirty and hold more bacteria.

According to a **study** funded by the American Chemistry Council, most reusable bags are used primarily for grocery shopping and are not regularly washed, even though many people cross-contaminate meat and vegetables in the bags. Salmonella and E. Coli were the most common forms of bacteria found in almost half of the 85 bags used in the study. However, results did show that hand and machine washing eliminated most bacteria found in the bags.

Brownley **argued** that consumers would have to use "common sense" when addressing the bacteria issue.

The American Chemistry Council and opponents such as the American Forest and Paper Association also argue that banning plastic bags will further hurt California's economy. They claim the bill threatens plastic bag workers' jobs and that the plastic industry is willing to invest in more recycling programs for plastic bags.

Brownley and other proponents of the bill disagree.

"According to our research, most plastic bag manufacturers produce dozens of different products and rarely is the single-use bag distributed in California a significant portion of a company's product line and revenue," Brownley said. "We believe the impact on jobs in California will be minimal and will be offset many times over by new green business stemming from the increased demand for reusable bags. Some of the very companies that claim future job losses can retool to manufacture reusable bags."

Heal the Bay, a non-profit environmental group, argues that before San Francisco's plastic bag reduction ordinance, the city was paying up to \$8.5 million to address plastic bag litter –17 cents for every bag distributed in the city. San Francisco grocery and pharmacy stores are now banned from using single-use plastic bags.

A **draft environmental report** from the Los Angeles County Department of Public Works also concluded that banning single-use plastic bags would help lower negative environmental impact. The report was conducted to analyze the potential of a plastic bag ban ordinance in Los Angeles County.

The report showed that biodegradable carryout bags, which have been praised as a better solution than a ban, are not practical because there are no "local composting facilities able to process the (...) bags."

A number of California cities and counties, as well as Seattle and Washington, D.C., also enforce a surcharge on all single-use plastic bags.