

California Legislature Passes Ban on Disposable Plastic Bags

If Signed by Gov. Jerry Brown, Bill Would Be First Such Statewide Ban in the Country

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California's legislature passed a ban on plastic grocery bags over opposition from bag manufacturers.
Reuters

Paper or plastic? In California, the latter may soon no longer be an option and the former may come at a cost.

On Friday, the state Legislature passed a bill banning the use of plastic bags at California grocery stores, pharmacies, liquor stores and other businesses. If signed by Gov. Jerry Brown, the bill would institute the first statewide ban on plastic bags in the U.S. A spokesman for the governor said he hasn't taken a position on the issue.

Cities including San Francisco, Los Angeles, Seattle and Portland, Ore., already have such bans in place, as do most counties in Hawaii. The California ban would prohibit the thin, commonly distributed

plastic bags in grocery stores and pharmacies beginning July 1, 2015, and go into effect for convenience and liquor stores on that date a year later. Proponents say plastic bags are rarely recycled and commonly littered. The plastic often ends up in the ocean, they say, harming sea life.

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The final bill, passed Friday by the Senate, would allow reusable plastic bags to be sold at grocery stores, and would also allow paper bags to be sold to consumers for a

minimum of 10 cents.

State Sen. Kevin de León, a Democrat from Los Angeles, opposed previous versions of the bill because of concerns that it would harm Command Packaging, a company in his district. The company has since retooled some of its operations to create reusable plastic bags out of recycled agricultural film used for wrapping crops, and Mr. de León, the state Senate's incoming leader, now supports the ban. "This measure is going to prove that a cleaner environment is compatible with expanding the economy and job creation," Mr. de León said. "Part of the bill creates a new market for agriculture film recycling."

Most producers of plastic bags and paper bags oppose the law, saying it would kill jobs and serve as a tax on consumers. The statewide ban is supported by the California Grocers Association, which says it will eliminate a patchwork of local legislations.

"This bill is widely supported by groups representing environmental causes, workers, the poor, and business. It's pretty rare to have such a diverse and sweeping coalition standing behind a policy," California Grocers Association President Ron Fong said in a statement. "This has never been about anything but encouraging Californians to shift habits and use reusable bags."

The United Food and Commercial Workers, a union that represents grocery workers, also backs the ban, saying it wants the money currently spent on plastic bags to be used for worker training and food-safety initiatives.

Mark Daniels, an executive with plastic-bag maker Hilex Poly, in Hartsville, S.C., said the law amounts to a giveaway to grocers in the state, which now will collect a profit from products that they once were required to buy and give away free to consumers at cost. Such plastic bags are popular among consumers, he said, as they are often reused for lunches, lining trash bags or scooping up dog waste, he said.

"If the grocers truly thought that plastic bags were not environmentally friendly, and their customers felt that way and demanded it, every grocer in California can voluntarily give out paper bags if they so choose," he said. "Now they are asking the government to mandate the banning of these bags for their financial benefit."

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