

# Sacking the Plastic Bag

## The Problem

Approximately 24 billion plastic bags are landfilled in California each year.<sup>1</sup> Less than 5% of all single use plastic bags are actually recycled.<sup>2</sup> Many of these plastic bags become litter and eventually end up in our oceans as Plastic Pollution.

Plastic Pollution is ubiquitous and can be found from remote arctic regions to highly populated urban beaches.<sup>3</sup> It is estimated that 60–80% of all marine debris, and 90% of floating debris is plastic. Plastic is so durable that it can take hundreds of years to break down at sea, and some types never truly biodegrade at sea.<sup>4</sup>

Volunteers participating in the 2008 International Coastal Cleanup discovered 47 animals and birds entangled or trapped by plastic bags.<sup>5</sup>



*Trash piled up in Ballona Creek after a storm. Photo courtesy of the CA Coastal Commission.*

## Taxpayer Costs

When people purchase food, the cost of paper and plastic bags is embedded in the price of the food.<sup>6</sup>

123,405 tons of plastic grocery bags are found in the waste stream annually.<sup>7</sup> Each year, San Francisco estimates it spends \$8.5 million in plastic bag clean up, which translates to about 17 cents per bag.<sup>8</sup>

The annual cost to clean Los Angeles County's 31 miles of coastline is over \$4 million.<sup>9</sup>



*Sea Lion ingesting a plastic bag. Photo courtesy of the Whale Rescue Team.*

## Past and Current Solutions

Despite past efforts under AB 2449 (Levine, 2006) to require grocery stores to accept plastic bags for recycling, these programs have demonstrated little success in increasing the recycling rate.<sup>10</sup> Further, current law limits the tools available for local governments to more effectively control the pollution from plastic bags, such as imposing fees.<sup>11</sup> With no other options available, cities have decided to outright ban plastic bags.

San Francisco was the first U.S. city to ban single-use plastic bags in pharmacies and grocery stores. Since then, Fairfax<sup>14</sup>, Malibu<sup>15</sup>, Palo Alto<sup>16</sup>, San Jose<sup>17</sup>, Santa Monica<sup>18</sup>, Calabasas<sup>19</sup>, Los Angeles County<sup>20</sup> and Marin County<sup>21</sup>, passed ordinances banning plastic carryout bags. Some of these ordinances place a charge on paper carryout bags to drive the use of reusable bags.

Bangladesh, Belgium, China, Denmark, Germany, Hong Kong, Ireland, Kenya, Mexico City, Netherlands, New Delhi, India, South Africa, and Taiwan all have imposed a single use plastic bag fee, tax, ban, or a combination. Collectively, these countries represent an estimated 25% of the world's population that has committed to reducing single-use plastic bags.<sup>12</sup>

Ireland implemented a plastic bag fee to discourage the excessive use of plastic bags (the fee was increased to 22¢ in 2007). Since 2002, plastic bag use has decreased by an estimated 90%.<sup>13</sup>

## A Call for Urgent Action

Nine in 10 Californians say the quality of the beach and ocean is just as important to them personally as well as for the overall quality of life and economy in the state.<sup>22</sup> California's "ocean economy" is valued at \$43 billion.<sup>23</sup>

As part of a statewide strategy to reduce marine debris and protect or valuable ocean economy, the California Ocean Protection Council in November 2008 adopted legislative recommendations to prohibit single-use products, including plastic bags, that pose significant ocean litter impacts.<sup>24</sup>

### Key Elements of Strong Bag Policy:

- ◆ Prohibit all supermarkets, retail pharmacies and convenience stores from distributing single-use plastic carryout bags to their customers at point of sale.
- ◆ Require stores to offer paper bags at a nominal cost to consumers to encourage reusable bag use.
- ◆ Require stores to make reusable bags that designed for 125 uses or more and are non-toxic available for purchase instead of distributing using single-use carry-out bags.
- ◆ Allow for reusable and recycled paper bags to be provided to Food Stamps and WIC food program participants at no cost



Heal the Bay

For more information contact:  
Heal the Bay at (310) 451-1500 x162  
kjames@healthebay.org or ssikich@healthebay.org

## References:

1. California Department of Resources Recovery and Recycling. (Available at: <http://www.calrecycle.ca.gov/Plastics/AtStore/default.htm>).
2. Los Angeles County (Aug. 2007). "An Overview of Carryout Bags in Los Angeles County: Staff Report to the Board of Supervisors" ; U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, *2005 Characterization of Municipal Solid Waste*, Table 7.
3. S. Casey, (2006) "Our Oceans are Turning in to Plastic, Are We?" *Best Life*: 103-109.
4. M. Gordon (2006) "Eliminating Land-based Discharges of Marine Debris in California: A Plan of Action from The Plastic Debris Project;" Prepared by the California Coastal Commission (Available at: [www.plasticdebris.org/CA\\_Action\\_Plan\\_2006.pdf](http://www.plasticdebris.org/CA_Action_Plan_2006.pdf) ).
5. Ocean Conservancy. A Rising Tide of Ocean Debris and What We Can Do About It. International Coastal Cleanup 2009 Report. Available at: [http://www.oceanconservancy.org/pdf/A\\_Rising\\_Tide\\_full\\_lowres.pdf](http://www.oceanconservancy.org/pdf/A_Rising_Tide_full_lowres.pdf)
6. Los Angeles County (Aug. 2007). "An Overview of Carryout Bags in Los Angeles County: Staff Report to the Board of Supervisors," Table 9. Based on assumption that average person uses about 600 plastic bags per year.
7. 2008 CIWMB Waste Management Study
8. Office of Supervisor Ross Mirkarimi, Fact Sheet: Costs Associated with Paper and Plastic Bags 1 (City and County of San Francisco 2007) (on file with author) (information from Mike Crossetti, San Francisco Recycling & Disposal). City of San Francisco Dept of the Environment "Bag Cost Analysis" (Nov.18, 2004).
9. Los Angeles River Trash TMDL, approved by the Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board, Aug. 9, 2007. [http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/losangeles/board\\_decisions/basin\\_plan\\_amendments/technical\\_documents/bpa\\_50\\_2007-012\\_td.shtml](http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/losangeles/board_decisions/basin_plan_amendments/technical_documents/bpa_50_2007-012_td.shtml) (accessed August 3rd, 2010)
10. Personal communication with California Integrated Waste Management Board staff (8 Dec 2008); R. Davis, "Paper or Plastic?" *Voice of San Diego*, 2 Dec 2008.
11. Public Resources Code §42254 (b).
12. Population statistics available at: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_countries\\_by\\_population](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_population) citing various sources, including United Nations estimates, official statistical, and census offices.
13. Ireland Department of the Environment (Available at: [www.environ.ie/en/Environment/Waste/PlasticBags/News](http://www.environ.ie/en/Environment/Waste/PlasticBags/News)) Retrieved 07/07/10;
14. Adopted by ballot initiative (Measure C), Nov. 4, 2008.
15. Adopted May 12, 2008; Effective December 2008.
16. Effective September 2009. Only applies to large grocery stores.
17. Adopted December 15, 2010; Effective January 1, 2012
18. Adopted January 25, 2011; Effective September 2011
19. Adopted February 9, 2011; Effective July 1, 2011
20. Adopted November 16, 2010; Effective July 1, 2011
21. Adopted January 25, 2011; Effective January 1, 2012
22. Public Policy Institute of California, (February 2006). "PPIC Statewide Survey: Californians and the Environment, 2006."
23. Kidlow, J. et al. (July 2005). "California's Ocean Economy," Report to the California Resources Agency, prepared by the National Ocean Economics Program.
24. California Ocean Protection Council, "An Implementation Strategy for the California Ocean Protection Council Resolution to Reduce and Prevent Ocean Litter," Adopted November 20, 2008.