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Saturday, March 03, 2007

Plastic bag glut leads to reform

Producers and retailers are under more pressure to start programs that reduce waste in landfills.

Gilbert Chan / Sacramento Bee

Chinook Shin strolled from the Sacramento (Calif.) Natural Foods Co-op checkout carrying her groceries in a plastic Rite Aid shopping bag.

As she headed toward the exit, she deposited a token into a charitable donation box, getting credit for bringing her own carry-out bag for the groceries.

"I usually bring my own bag so we don't fill the landfills with plastic and paper," she said.

With U.S. consumers accumulating an estimated 100 billion plastic shopping bags a year, retailers and the packaging manufacturers are coming under increased pressure to launch waste-reduction programs.

This month Swedish furniture giant Ikea will start charging U.S. customers 5 cents a bag and eventually phase them out entirely. The company has one store in Michigan, in Canton. Already, German-based retailer ALDI charges customers for bags at its more than 800 supermarkets in the Midwest and East.

In January, San Francisco and Marin County supervisors proposed banning these popular plastic carry-out bags and requiring retailers to provide reusable or biodegradable bags that can break down through composting.

In July, a new California law promoted by Assemblyman Lloyd Levine, D-Van Nuys, goes into effect requiring stores with at least 40,000 square feet of retail space to set up a recycling program and offer reusable shopping bags. Californians use more than 19 billion bags annually, putting 147 tons of waste into landfills.

The law is a "first step toward a permanent solution. This is the best we can get at the moment," Levine said. "There is still a problem to address. The ultimate (solution) is

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Justin Sullivan / Getty Images

A man uses plastic bags in a store in San Francisco, which may be the first U.S. city to ban shoppers from using them.

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a fee. That creates an incentive for recycling. I would love to see (retailers) charge for the bags."

But manufacturers and the supermarket industry have battled bans or any recycling fee similar to the deposits charged for beverage cans and bottles. Officials prefer public awareness campaigns such as the voluntary program launched in San Francisco last year -- a drive that grocers say resulted in a usage drop of 7.6 million bags. San Francisco officials have not confirmed the number.

"There are more effective ways than just banning a product. A number of stores are beginning to offer reusable bags," said Dave Heylen, spokesman for the California Grocers Association. "We need to get the bags out of the waste stream through recycling and reuse."

Globally, there has been some action. Bangladesh has outlawed plastic shopping bags, viewing them as a threat to wildlife and the environment. Australia is considering a ban despite efforts by retailers and consumers that cut usage by 45 percent, a drop of 3.5 billion bags between 2002 and 2005.

Ireland taxes bags, and Toronto city leaders are considering a similar move.

Advocates say plastic bags are the best way to carry home groceries. The bags are lightweight, inexpensive, waterproof and often reused by consumers for trash or lunches, they say.

"Consumers find them convenient and easy to use. Most bags are reused," said Judith Dunbar, spokeswoman for the plastics division of the American Chemistry Council, an industry trade group.

One California grocer is testing an environmentally friendly bag that can biodegrade in composting operations.

"We're doing our part. It does make us feel good," said Tom Butler, manager of Wagon Wheel Market, a small meat and deli outlet in Oroville.


The bag, produced by Roplast Industries Inc. in Oroville, is larger than the standard plastic grocery bag and sturdy enough to carry a 30-pound turkey.

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