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Free grocery bags targeted for extinction in California

jdowning@sacbee.com

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The plastic grocery bag is fighting for its crinkly life.

From the city of San Francisco to Los Angeles County, more than a dozen local governments around the state have proposed or passed plastic-bag restrictions, ranging from recycling mandates to outright bans.

Now, a proposal in the Legislature would put a 25-cent fee on all disposable bags – paper or plastic – given out at drug and grocery store check stands starting Jan. 1, 2010. It has won key support from the grocery and retail industries and faces its next legislative step today.

Those in favor of the fee, led by Assemblyman Lloyd Levine, D-Van Nuys, and a collection of environmental groups, point to dirty oceans, sewers fouled with plastic and millions of dollars in litter-cleanup costs. Opponents – mainly bag-industry and taxpayer organizations – say plastic bags draw more blame than they deserve and the fee would be a burden on consumers.

"People have completely lost their perspective," said Stephen Joseph, a Tiburon lawyer who runs savetheplasticbag.com, an industry group.

Both sides expect a fee would drive shoppers to switch to reusable bags. After Ireland imposed a fee on plastic checkout-counter bags in 2002, their use dropped by about 90 percent.

About 80 percent of bags given out in the state's supermarkets are plastic, according to Californians Against Waste, an advocacy group.

Winning over grocers

Powerful grocery and retail industry groups objected to an early version of the proposal that put a fee only on plastic bags. They worried that stores would be pressured to switch to paper bags, which cost about 8 cents each vs. about 1.5 cents for a plastic bag.

Now that the measure – Assembly Bill 2769 – covers both paper and plastic, though, grocers are behind it.

Big supermarket and drugstore chains would rather have a single statewide standard than a growing number of local regulations. Also, doing away with free bags could save them money.

Checkout-counter sacks cost supermarkets on the order of \$1,500 to \$6,000 a month, according to bag makers. That's a considerable expense in a business where the median monthly profit, after taxes, is about \$30,000 per store, according to data from the Food Marketing Institute.

Grocers still worry that the end of free bags would slow checkout lines as shoppers and baggers fumble with reusable bags. But they also don't want to be seen as anti-environment.

"There does need to be some effort to curb plastics," said Ronald Fong, president of the California Grocers Association.

Under the proposal, stores would get a 5-cent to 10-cent cut of any bag fees collected. The balance would go into a state litter-cleanup fund. Small groceries, pharmacies and convenience stores still would be allowed to give out free bags.

The bag fee would be capped initially at \$2 per shopper. People in government food-assistance programs would be exempt.

Despite the backing from retailers, the proposal's chances of becoming law appear to have slipped in recent days. Supporters are scuffling over details of the plan, according to a California Retailers Association memo provided to The Bee. Also, the prospect of new taxes to close the state's budget gap has lawmakers leery about raising any other costs for consumers.

Consumer change

Outside two Sacramento supermarkets recently, not one of a dozen shoppers interviewed was happy about the prospect of paying for grocery sacks. Still, most said a fee would indeed change their bagging habits.

"I'm not going to spend the 25 cents," said Susan Geurtze, 48, who was loading 14 plastic bags of groceries into the trunk of her car in the Safeway parking lot on Del Paso Road in Natomas.

"It's the same thing as the price of gas. It would force you to conserve," she said.

Geurtze says she has piles of white plastic bags at home. She reuses many of them but still tosses loads straight into the garbage.

Geurtze already owns several reusable grocery totes. But while she often carries them to farmers markets, she seldom thinks to bring them to the grocery store.

Reuse, recycle?

The plastics industry says California's current bag-recycling law, which took effect in July

2007, should be given more of a chance. The law, also authored by Levine, requires supermarkets and drugstores to provide plastic-bag recycling bins and sell reusable bags.

Before the law passed, the California Integrated Waste Management Board estimated less than 5 percent of plastic bags were recycled. It's unclear whether that has increased.

Some studies have found as many as 60 percent of plastic carryout bags are reused in the home (or while walking the dog), which may contribute to the low recycling rate. Bagmakers point out that Ireland's fee on bags drove up retail sales of plastic trash-can liners as consumers' stashes of free plastic carryout bags ran out.

Standard plastic grocery sacks can be recycled into new plastic bags, but it's a costly process. The top destination for California's recycled plastic bags is a plastic-lumber factory in Nevada, according to Californians Against Waste.

Backers of the bag fee argue that even if recycling could be increased, the number of bags in circulation wouldn't drop much, and the litter problem would remain.

The plastic bag of the future?

For the Sacramento Valley's only major plastic bag maker, Oroville's Roplast Industries Inc., a fee on bags might boost business.

Roplast makes heavy-duty, glossy plastic shopping bags – not the thin white bags targeted by Levine's bill. Roplast's core customers historically have been retailers willing to pay for an attractive bag to give shoppers at checkout.

The company's bags qualify as "reusable" under the proposal, though, and Roplast hopes to expand its grocery store business if the bill passes.

Save Mart already carries Roplast's reusable plastic grocery totes for 25 cents apiece. They're made to hold up through hundreds of uses but fold small enough to fit in a back pocket. They're cheap compared with canvas or woven-plastic totes, which typically retail for \$1 and up. Roplast has even secured two reusable-bag trademarks: "The Bag For Life" and "The Bring-Back Bag."

Still, company President Robert Bateman opposes the 25-cent fee proposal, which he says is too heavy-handed. He also worries that each new restriction on plastic bags begets another.

"It's a momentum," he said, "that can't be stopped."

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