

Plastic Bag Reduction Ordinance, San Francisco

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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Culture Change Letter #155

Will compostible-bag substitution accomplish what fees on plastic bags could, at least in the progressive California city of San Francisco? Probably, if the non-petroleum content and biodegradability of the new bags, and the use of reusable cloth bags, are maximized. This reporter believes a worthy goal can be met here starting this spring.

The plastic plague is still growing and out of control, with the ecosystem and our lives in the balance. Targeting bags is a place to start modifying the unconscious behavior of consumers and the conscious pollution by huge retailers.

Two years ago, the City of San Francisco was poised to become the first municipality in North America to enact an ordinance to place a fee on petroleum-plastic bags given out at supermarket checkout stands. But the liberal Mayor, lobbied by plastics-industry and megagrocer-industry interests, scuttled the legislation despite massive and widespread support.

Then, last year the Governor banned all California cities from placing fees on bags. There's a clue as to how committed Arnold Schwarzenegger is to moving the state away from fossil fuels.

Fortunately, some people don't just throw in the towel. As usual, it is at the local level whence initiatives come that society as a whole should embrace. San Francisco is actually not so terribly ahead of the pack, when nation after nation has enacted fees and bans on plastic bags with great success. These measures have reduced pollution of the landscape and waterways, and cut down on petroleum (and greenhouse gases) generated for the bags.

At the City Hall hearing in San Francisco held by a committee of the Board of Supervisors, on March 8, 2007, the Plastic Bag Reduction Ordinance was pushed by both government and citizens. Part of the overflow crowd had to go occupy a nearby room with closed-circuit TV.

The targeting of plastic bags by the city once again focused on the needs of the composting program that the city cannot carry out properly when there is plastics contamination. So, the proposed ordinance would substitute compostible bags for petroleum-plastic bags given out at supermarket check-out counters. The benefits cited most often at the hearing were greenhouse-gas reduction (9.2 million pounds per year) and lessening oil (petroleum) consumption at a time of both peak oil and oil war (as mentioned by the committee and citizens).

The object is to remove ultimately 150 million plastic bags from the waste stream annually. At present, only one percent of the petroleum-plastic shopping bags are recycled in San Francisco, even after major grocers have tried to improve the rate to make up for their defeating the bag fee.

After supportive testimony from a large small-grocers group, waste experts and environmentalists, the committee decided to include more than the 54 stores targeted in the legislation; large pharmacy stores are to be included. This change puts off adoption of the ordinance until March 22 at the next hearing.

The pro-plastics "suits" were on hand

but limited their participation to the big grocers trade association head's public comment against the proposed ordinance. He was raked over the coals by Committee member Ross Mirkarimi, the architect of the proposed ordinance, who excoriated industry for their devious accomplishment of the state law known as Bill 2449. It not only limited cities from implementing fees on plastic bags, but prevented

mandatory data collection so that the people can know what quantity of plastics retailers are distributing.

This tells us how threatened polluters can sometimes be by people knowing what's being done in the name of free enterprise.

Concerns of the committee (City Operations & Neighborhood Services) and the public included petroleum content of bioplastics, GMO/petroleum-oriented agriculture for making bioplastics, and the need to address counterfeiting of the coming approved green-stripe compostible bags. The director of the city's Environment Department was well prepared for the many questions he received, and pointed out such facts as the huge loss of money gained in recycling plastic compared to the profitability of recycling aluminum.

Mirkarimi said other cities are ready to emulate San Francisco on this compostible bag program, and that the market for compostible bags should suddenly improve greatly, bringing per-bag costs down from 6 cents-plus toward paper bag costs.

My public comment was approximately as follows:

"Good afternoon Supervisors. I am Jan Lundberg, with Culture Change, and as a petroleum industry analyst my work has included promoting plastic-bag fees around the nation as part of petroleum reduction. I screen the award-winning Our Synthetic Sea, a documentary flick I recommend, from algalita.org.

I am here to support the Plastic Bag Reduction Ordinance, and am joined in this by the Campaign Against the Plastic Plague.

Recycling of plastics is very low, and compostability and biodegradability are not easy, because optimal conditions are required, and there is petroleum content in some of these alternatives. So reduction of bags is the best course of action.

Petroleum dependence is the crisis. We are nearing the end of the age of petroleum. Because of this Culture Change puts on Petrocollapse Conferences that address peak oil as well as climate change.

When we no longer have unlimited trucking, composting needs to be more local. So households need to be encouraged to compost. If I can be of further service, our website culturechange.org is where we have reports on plastics, and I can be contacted through the website. I am available to answer any questions. Thank you."

Although this hearing and its workings to modify language were an example of legislative "sausage making" that can be excruciating to witness, it was worthwhile because of the sincerity and absence of corruption.

The same committee session next looked at phthalates and bisphenol-A, for banning these carcinogens and endocrine disrupters from baby bottles. More later in Culture Change on this story from yours truly. Meanwhile, see link at bottom on bisphenol-A, and before swigging your beer, wipe off the bottle top after you pop the cap!

- Jan

(Now in Santa Barbara to help spread the above efforts and complement a major campaign by the Community Environmental Council (CEC) to have the public exchange plastic bags for cloth bags. They are emblazoned with "Keep our sea plastic free!" The CEC held a successful day-long festival on March 10 at the town's beautiful and touristy wharf in the fancy marine life museum, the Ty Warner Sea Center. Members of the public came to hand in their stockpile of plastic bags to recycle and get a free tote bag, and view Our Synthetic Sea.)

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City of San Francisco, Dept. of the Environment:

sfgov.org/site/mainpages_index.asp?id=13868

Community Environmental Council, Santa Barbara:

communityenvironmentalcouncil.org/

DVD "Our Synthetic Sea" from Algalita Marine Research Foundation can be obtained via their website:

algalita.org

Campaign Against the Plastic Plague/Earth Resource Foundation:

earthresource.org

War on Plastic (Culture Change Letter #82):

culturechange.org/e-letter-plastics.html

Bisphenol-A, the endocrine disrupter in plastics you ingest, is exposed in yet another new scientific report getting into the mainstream press:

"Study: Canned food has toxic chemical
Pregnant women, infants at risk" -

nj.com/news/ledger