Plastics are on the run in San Francisco, the nation’s anti-petroleum capital

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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Culture Change Letter # 156 --
Come this fall, almost no one in San Francisco will be collecting plastic bags -- that are almost never recycled. These bags clog the City’s waste system and contaminate its compost program. The ban on petroleum-plastic shopping bags is in addition to the City’s recent styrofoam container ban and an imminent ban on phthalates (and eventually bisphenol-A) for children’s products. Let’s hear it for the City by the Bay and a small core of public servants and citizen activists.

The more you learn about plastics, the more scary and disgusting they clearly become. I am passionately opposed to seeing more people plasticized and killed or deformed. Their children may take the brunt of this needless and ubiquitous exposure to powerful, little-understood poisons, so it’s not as if plastics are a fine and dandy choice according to one’s whims and consumer code.

We are all up against industry propaganda to continue to use plastics and to believe they are so useful to be essential, while supposedly harmless. Political muscle is sometimes applied, such as when Arnold Schwartzenegger signed a law last year banning cities in California from putting a fee on plastic-bag distribution and from obtaining statistics from grocery retailers on bags distributed.

This maneuver, however, served to galvanize the outraged City of San Francisco Supervisors and Environment Dept. workers -- because they had almost passed a bag-fee ordinance in 2005, but the mayor instead went for a compromise with industry. That failed, as bag recycling continued to be miniscule, and the devious, bad faith of industry lobbyists in Sacramento was obvious. So now we have "pay-back time." The vote to inaugurate the new compostable-bag-substitution law to end the reign of petroleum plastic shopping bags was 10-1, and the mayor is behind it too.

Plastics are almost all made from fresh petroleum, and represent a latent use for what was formerly extra, annoying natural gas and oil that was not of significant interest to the petroleum industry of yesteryear. Same for other petroleum products, but they became supposedly essential sometime after World War II.

To try to avoid petrochemicals such as plastics is still seen as a fringe attitude, although we have seen organic produce become quite popular among people wishing to avoid pesticides. It took several months for me to comfortably reject on a constant basis food and drink packaged in or served on plastic. This was back in 2004, after I viewed Our Synthetic Sea and pondered the implications for months, before making changes in my shopping habits. I ceased justifying plastics "mitigation" that meant reusing containers, etc., or stockpiling them, intending to recycle them. I learned that recycling plastic is mostly a joke, and that some of it is just burned out of our sight. Incineration means putting dioxin into the air, so it’s disappointing to recall hearing that Hilary Clinton prior to becoming First Lady used to aid incinerator interests. For these and other reasons, I began to get plastic out of my life as much as possible, even though I still tap these plastic computer keys. And I am fed up with using dental floss and toothbrushes made of plastic.

The length of time I took to reject most plastics took a little longer than the time I had needed in 1989 to go car-free and never look back. The common denominator is that petroleum is involved in our driving (e.g., asphalt, tires, fuels and plastics) and in our non-driving habits, such as buying plastic-wrapped food carried in double plastic bags. Cars kill about 100,000 people in the U.S. each year, through crashes and toxic fumes, and many times more lives are claimed by heart disease from sitting too much in cars. (There are plastic poisons lurking in cars -- see link below.) But plastics are killers on a much more subtle and invisible level. What they do to the oceans and to our bodies is now barely becoming known, and the damage has yet to be calculated. Suffice to say that the cancer epidemic has a great friend in plastics and other petrochemicals. Someday, although hard to imagine now, PVC, for example, is going to be banned in the civilized world -- unless our petroleum vulnerability takes us down first, or before climate disaster might terminate our full-on plastic contamination.

San Francisco’s proud moment

It’s encouraging to campaigners against the plastic plague to see major headlines for San Francisco’s ban on petroleum-plastic bags at the end of March. Culture Change ran the story on March 12. We now look beyond this particular ordinance to bring you news on bans on other plastics. The chances are good for this, considering the Board of Supervisors’ vote-margin on the petroleum-plastic bag ban. The groundwork is actually set for even greater progress in emancipating ourselves nationally and globally from petroleum dependence and plastics, as San Francisco leads the way.

Fortunately, the Supervisors, led by Ross Mirkarimi of the 5th District, are solidly aware that dwindling petroleum is being used for plastics at a time of peaking global extraction. Just as clear to the Board is the global warming aspect of using

petroleum. Mentioned even more often by Mirkarimi is the connection of petroleum plastics to war for oil based on bogus weapons of mass destruction.

San Francisco's contribution to petroleum-guzzling and carbon emissions are significant, and when other cities follow and curb plastics, we'll see significant numbers on oil-equivalent and carbon output that collectively will be on a par with major initiatives such as Kyoto. This will cumulatively become especially likely as the U.S government continues to oppose mandatory reductions in greenhouse gases. And as we all know, the U.S. maintains an energy policy of maximizing fossil fuels in today's growth-at-all-costs system.

The big picture on plastics and petroleum has been made clear to San Francisco's Supervisors and relevant agencies, such as when Culture Change has testified, passed out materials, and emailed background information. Additionally, the City adopted the first Peak Oil Resolution that calls for studying and taking action on what more and more people are suspecting implies petrocollapse or radical lifestyle change.

Although barely scratching the surface on dealing with petroleum, San Francisco is nevertheless the nation's leader in dealing with the petroleum crisis, thanks to honest action on plastics and peak oil. These developments are consistent with San Francisco's history as a progressive and liberal city, as I told a radio interviewer with KMUD in equally progressive Humboldt County far to the north in redwood country (March 28, 2007). No wonder Culture Change's next Petrocollapse Conference will be in San Francisco. (And the famous Bay will serve as a post-petroleum demonstration-ground as we take another step toward launching the Sail Transport Network.)

Lest anyone believe that San Francisco or any other part of "Ecotopia" is truly a different culture from the rest of the U.S., keep in mind that the approach most often mentioned to switching to reusable shopping bags is to "keep them in the trunk of your car." This grates on a conscious bicyclist or one who uses San Francisco's excellent transit system. Car-free living is inevitable, but not in the eyes of the blind consumer who has bought into industrial progress. We could go further and say today's citizens are hammered on to just vote and keep glued to mainstream media. We will all have to start living without petroleum and plastics as the global economy nears colossal failure due to sudden lack of energy and feedstocks for everything modern people take for granted in their material lives.

At the press conference on the City Hall steps on March 27, as the major players heralded the new plastic bag legislation, excitement was in the air. Positive alternatives to the dilemma of "paper or plastic" were presented in the form of attractive canvas shopping bags handed out with the Dept. of Environment's logo printed in green. Standing in back of the podium with me as a member of the supportive backdrop was Nancy Pelosi's son Paul, who is a Commissioner on the Environment for the City. This fortunate connection for the city and the nation, with his knowledge base, can conceivably -- say over a family dinner -- shorten the time to when the federal government catches up to other countries that banned or discouraged plastic bags. By that time, San Francisco will have made further strides on the threats petroleum poses that the nation and planet will be thankful for. For example:

Healthy Products, Healthy Children Ordinance

Supervisor Michela Alioto-Pier has authored an ordinance that will ban toys, child care products, and child-feeding products made with certain phthalates, and in future ban toys, child care products, and child feeding products made with bisphenol-A, pending State action.

Phthalates are softeners, and bisphenol-A is a major component of hard plastics. They leach into our bodies and the water supply, and are not limited to baby and child products: blood bags and shower curtains have phthalates, and cans and jar-lids have bisphenol-A. These toxic and estrogenic chemicals are increasingly implicated in deadly diseases that are epidemics in modern consumer society.

Where will it end? Get used to it: State Senate President pro Tempore Don Perata has given California its Environmental Contaminant Biomonitoring Program -- the nation's first statewide biomonitoring program for measuring the chemical pollution in people. Perata represents the East Bay, across the polluted water from San Francisco. You don't have to wonder if we're talking about monitoring the effects of the plastic plague and other petrochemical assaults on our health and on our species' future ability to reproduce.

In April, San Francisco's partial phthalates ban, and soon to follow, a bisphenol-A ban, will be part of the state's trend toward finally handling carcinogens and endocrine disruptors:

"If, by January 1, 2008, the State of California has not banned or significantly restricted the use of Bisphenol-A in toys, child care products, and child feeding products, the Department of Public Health, in consultation with the Department of the Environment, shall make recommendations to the Board of Supervisors on regulating the manufacture, sale, or distribution in commerce within the City of such products." The state legislation is being pushed by Assemblywoman

Fiona Ma in Sacramento.

In conclusion:

It can't be stressed too often that our appetite for petroleum is going to run into sudden, near termination due to peaking petroleum extraction globally. This is in large part because the physical supply and capability to distribute petroleum are going to be blocked and perhaps entirely halted by the (dys)function of the petroleum market characterized by super high prices, hoarding, crippling outages, and failure of the petroleum-based infrastructure. Alternative fuels will not come through as dreamed. When Western Civilization is faced with the end of growth, there will be no preparation or significant mitigation. Picture post-Katrina New Orleans writ very large and without any rescue -- not even incompetent, corrupt rescue.

Evidence for petrocollapse continues to be amassed. The Congressional Peak Oil Caucus is trying to get the word out, and this week it is highlighting another study. Congressman Roscoe Bartlett 's (R-MD) press manager Lisa Wright reports in EnergyBulletin.net:

A new "GAO report on peak oil will reveal that the U.S. is particularly vulnerable and the U.S. federal government is unprepared to respond to severe consequences from an increasing risk of significant disruptions to world oil supplies from peak oil and other factors."

Plastics are only one part of the refined petroleum barrel (or natural gas cubic measurement), but it is high time we put them way up on our list of other petroleum products, such as gasoline, that are part of the hopelessly unsustainable and deadly "non-negotiable American life-style."

Styrofoam container ban

Last November the San Francisco Board of Supervisors banned plastic to-go boxes. Outlawed is the use of plastic foam to-go containers by city restaurants. The ordinance, introduced by Board of Supervisors President Aaron Peskin, would apply to about 3,400 restaurants in San Francisco as well city facility food-service providers and vendors contracting with the city. (See link below for details.)

Details on phthalate-bisphenol-A ban:

San Francisco's Supervisor Alioto-Pier's legislation will probably result in banning some really gnarly poisons in plastics that affect babies and children especially.

Here are some of the official findings on phthalates, from the draft law supplied to Culture Change:

(a) Phthalates are a family of chemicals that are used as an additive in a number of consumer products and are used to make plastics flexible for use in children's toys, shower curtains, medical supplies, and building materials.

(b) Phthalate additives are not bound tightly within the plastic and may leach out of the product. Leaching may occur especially as a result of mechanical stress such as chewing or bending, and upon exposure to fats, saliva and warm temperatures

(c) Phthalates have been shown to cause reproductive harm including genital defects, sperm damage, reduced testosterone production, and premature deliveries.

(d) Government agencies and scientific bodies in the European Union (EU) have recognized the potential harm of six specific types of phthalates: DEHP, DBP, BBP, DINP, DIDP, and DNOP especially to infants and young children; and as a result, these chemicals are banned from use in children's products in the EU.
(e) The United States Consumer Product Safety Commission has established a voluntary program to eliminate one type of phthalate, DEHP, from children's toys.
(f) Studies and testing indicate that regardless of this voluntary phase-out, toys sold in the United States still contain DEHP, especially toys made from PVC plastic.
(g) Consumers are not able to make informed purchasing decisions regarding children's products because there is no requirement to list phthalates content on product labels.

Bisphenol-A
(h) Bisphenol-A (BPA) is a building block of polycarbonate plastic used in such products as

clear plastic baby bottles and water bottles, and in other materials such as the epoxy resin coatings that line food containers.
(i) BPA has been shown to leach out of the polycarbonate plastic upon exposure to heat and mechanical scrubbing and has been detected in the liquid contained in plastic bottles that have been exposed to heat.

(j) BPA mimics the hormone estrogen and is therefore considered to be an endocrine disruptor. The hormone systems of young children are uniquely susceptible to low doses of estrogenic substances. Scientific studies have shown that BPA at very low doses can affect brain chemistry and structure, behavior, the immune system, enzyme activity, the male reproductive system, and the female reproductive system in a variety of animals, including snails, fish, frogs, and mammals.

(k) Scientific bodies within the US government and the European Union have concluded that animal studies such as those carried out on BPA are a vital guide to identifying health risks for humans, but have thus far concluded that no restrictions on BPA in consumer products are warranted at this time.

(l) There is some uncertainty in the available scientific evidence, and The Department of Public Health and Department of the Environment should will continue to monitor emerging literature on the potential health effects of exposure to BPA.

(m) Consumers are not able to make informed purchasing decisions regarding children's products because there is no requirement to list BPA content on product labels

Further, the proposed law states: "Manufacturers should not replace phthalates pursuant to this (ordinance) with carcinogens… toxicants that cause birth defects, reproductive harm, or developmental harm... Toys and child care products (are those) likely to be placed in a child's mouth, such as teething rings, rubber ducks, plastic books, and child feeding products, such as bottles, plates, or pacifiers."

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Background online:

San Francisco Chronicle coverage of the plastic bag ban: Read up on the new law:

"The Board of Supervisors in San Francisco -- at the behest of Supe Ross Mirkarimi -- voted 10-1 today (Ed Jew dissented) to ban petroleum-based checkout bags at large markets and pharmacies. The supervisors will need to take a second vote on the ordinance to officially pass it (each new law gets two readings); it will go into effect six months later."

The actual text of the law is at

http://www.sfgov.org/site/uploadedfiles/bdsupvrs/bosagendas/materials/070085.pdf

More background, including the prestigious newspaper's link to Culture Change:

http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/blogs/nwzchik/detail?blogid=32&entry_id=14804

- Editorial: Neither paper nor plastic

- Two Cents: How many do you have?

- Ban to apply to drug stores

- Grocery bag fee lacks support

- Editorial: Bagging the bags

Elsewhere on the Web:

- NPR: S.F. nears ban

- The Green Guide

- Culture Change

"San Francisco First City to Ban Plastic Shopping Bags" by Charlie Goodyear, San Francisco Chronicle

truthout.org/issues_06/032807EC.shtml

Toxic Chemical Leaches from Popular Baby Bottles

uspirg.org

Supervisors ban plastic to-go boxes... San Francisco Chronicle,

sfgate.com

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Additional resources:

City of San Francisco, Dept. of the Environment:

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

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

Plastics in car worse than even in your kitchen? - Culture Change Letter # 121

culturechange.org/cms

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

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