

# California plastic bag ban signed, setting off sweeping changes

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Time to invest in a reusable shopping bag.

Concluding the long odyssey of one of the most contentious bills of 2014, Gov. Jerry Brown on Tuesday signed legislation phasing out the single-use [plastic bags](#) that [grocery stores](#) and other retailers use to package products at the checkout line. Brown's assent hands a sweeping victory to environmentalists and vindicates the scores of cities and counties that have already banned bags.

"This bill is a step in the right direction – it reduces the torrent of plastic polluting our beaches, parks and even the vast ocean itself," Brown wrote in a signing message. "We're the first to ban these bags, and we won't be the last."

Minutes after Brown announced signing the bill, an industry group called the American Progressive Bag Alliance vowed to begin collecting signatures in an effort to overturn the law via a referendum on the 2016 ballot. They filed a request for title and summary later in the day.

"Our research confirms that the vast majority of California voters are opposed to legislation that bans recyclable plastic bags and allows grocers to charge and keep fees on other bags," a release from the organization said, denouncing the legislation as "a back room deal between the grocers and union bosses to scam California consumers out of billions of dollars without providing any public benefit – all under the guise of environmentalism."

A key advocate for the bill dismissed the referendum threat. About a third of California's residents already live under local bag bans, according to Californians Against Waste executive director [Mark Murray](#), who argued that reversing the state ban would require persuading some of the millions of Californians already accustomed to the policy.

"The more the public sees the policy, the more they like it," said Murray, whose organization sponsored the state legislation. "Once it's implemented in your community, your support for it grows."

Implementing the law will reverberate through multiple industries, shifting how retailers and manufacturers do business. Consumers will face a choice: Purchase a reusable bag, or pay at least 10 cents for a paper bag or a multiuse plastic carrier that meets a set of state durability standards.

It is not a new concept. There is precedent in the more than 100 municipalities across the state that have already enacted similar prohibitions after concluding that the amount of waste generated by plastic bags outweighs the convenience. Murray said the experiment has unfolded on the local level with few hitches.

"There has been very little in the way of noncompliance with the local ordinances – grocery stores seem to be complying readily," Murray said. "There has been zero need for plastic bag police."

Senate Bill 270 authorizes local governments to impose fines of up to \$5,000 on businesses that don't ditch their single-use bags or fail to charge for substitutes. But in [San Francisco](#), where California's first bag ban has been extended to cover businesses large and small, a spokesman said the city has not levied a single fine.

"The idea for us was really to change behavior," said San Francisco Department of the Environment spokesman Guillermo Rodriguez, pointing to a campaign that included preparing explanations of the new law merchants could post in their stores. "We felt the education and outreach has been the primary vehicle."

Davis is one of the most recent adherents, adopting a ban this summer. The manager of Nugget Market on Mace

Boulevard said the transition has been painless.

“It’s pretty seamless, I would say,” manager Vicente Osegueda said. “There’s always a little bit of a reaction when something’s different, but most (customers) really understand why they were taken out.”

That lack of consternation reflects the fact that organizations representing retailers and grocery stores backed SB 270, calling a statewide standard preferable to the current quilt of varying ordinances.

Opposition came from other quarters. Critics representing paper and plastic bag businesses denounced the minimum 10 cent fee as an unjustified sweetener included to buy the backing of grocery stores.

Lawmakers who voted against the bill called the 10 cent fee a hidden wealth transfer tax that would enrich a powerful industry while burdening low-income Californians, confusing consumers and damaging the economy.

“You have to follow the money,” Assemblyman Scott Wilk, R-Santa Clarita, said during debate on the Assembly floor. “What I see this becoming is another funding source for the grocery store industry. It’s just another way of taking a shot at the little guy.”

Denunciations persisted despite late amendments specifying that grocery stores must spend revenue from the bag fee on implementing the law. California Grocers Association president and CEO Ronald Fong predicted the charge would mostly cover the additional cost of buying paper bags.

“If there is anything left over, it will go to continual informational efforts and education to customers about their options of using reusable bags and benefiting from reusable bags,” Fong said.

Plastics industry representatives launched some of the fiercest critiques, warning about widespread job losses. A prior version of SB 270 faltered in 2013, failing to secure votes from Democratic legislators whose districts contain plastic bag plants.

Two of those lawmakers, Kevin de León of Los Angeles and Ricardo Lara of Bell Gardens, pivoted to support the bill after the author accepted amendments offering \$2 million in loans intended to preserve jobs by converting bag plants into facilities capable of producing the longer-lasting reusable bags still permissible under SB 270.

Not every business followed de León and Lara’s shift. Catherine Browne, general manager of a bag manufacturer headquartered in Huntington Park called Crown Poly, warned that the bill would undercut her business and its hundreds of employees.

“After 23 years in this industry as a job creator in California, the last thing I ever expected was for our product to become such a politically charged issue,” Browne testified at a hearing on the bill earlier this year, adding that the \$2 million set aside for retraining would pay for only a sliver of the overall amount of needed upgrades.

Other businesses are positioned to benefit. Oroville-based Roplast Industries has been producing multiuse bags for years, even as the flimsier single-use versions dominated the market. The business has seen its fortunes lift as more and more cities shift away from single-use bags. A statewide ban could be a financial boon.

“As each one passes, more and more reusable bags are needed,” said Darrell Costello, grocery sales manager for Roplast. “It’s huge,” she added of the statewide law. “It’s a lot of new stores coming online, and there’s more demand for reusable bags.”

The change could also bring relief to recycling centers that complain about the mountains of plastic bags they must sift through, a process that sometimes includes extracting bags that clog machinery. David Kuhnen, general manager of Recycling Industries in Sacramento, called plastic bags “a death knell” and “a pain in the butt,” referencing complaints about too many bags layered in the bales of recyclable material he sells.

“I’d love it” if the single-use bags are banned, Kuhnen said during a tour of his facility last week.

Single-use bags will disappear from checkout aisles slowly. Larger stores will need to cease offering them by July 2015, with convenience stores and other smaller businesses facing a July 2016 deadline. Proponents of SB 270 believe that timeline will allow stores to deplete the stocks of bags already on hand.

But even when the law blankets every store, it will not mean the end of plastic bags. Consumers can still swaddle their fruits and vegetables in plastic or use bags to shield leaky meat.

“I’ll be the first to admit that if my newspaper is soaking wet in the morning, I would get (irritated),” Murray said, furnishing an example where bags would still be useful. “There are places where plastic bags are going to continue to be in our lives.”

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