

Bans of Single-Use Plastics Rise in Popularity, Protecting the Oceans

Countries and localities around the world are taking on ocean pollution by banning single-use plastics — products typically used once and discarded, such as water bottles, grocery bags, and straws. According to Columbia University’s Earth Institute, Americans discarded about 33.6 million tons of plastic in 2014. UN Environment (UNEP) estimates that globally “only nine percent of the nine billion tons of plastic the world has ever produced has been recycled.” By 2050, UNEP estimates that 12 billion tons of plastic will have been land-filled or released into the environment. Some of that plastic, such as bags and polystyrene foam containers, can take thousands of years to decompose.

This discarded plastic causes a panoply of environmental problems. Ocean pollution is front and center — with 8 million tons of plastic blown or washed into the ocean each year, according to a 2015 article in *Science*. The tear-jerking images of dolphins and sea turtles suffering the consequences of ingesting or becoming entangled in plastic bags depict only part of the problem. Less obvious is the harm to coral reefs which, according to a study reported in *Science* earlier this year, are more vulnerable to disease when abraded by plastic. Plastic particles that contain chemicals also are routinely ingested by fish that in turn are harvested and consumed.

In a 2018 report, UNEP concludes: “government levies and bans — where properly planned and enforced — have been among the most effective strategies to limit overuse of disposable plastic products.” UNEP data tabulate the myriad forms of national-level bans on single-use plastics in countries in Africa, Asia, Central and South America, Europe, and Oceania. Most recently, India’s prime minister announced a

ban throughout his country on all single-use plastics by 2022.

Will the United States follow suit? To date, the government’s response has been tepid at best. Congress has not enacted any laws banning or imposing fees on single-use plastics. And, although dozens of localities ban or charge fees for plastic bags, including several major cities such as Chicago, Boston, and Los Angeles, so far only California and Hawaii have state-wide bans.

Several localities also have adopted measures to address additional types of single-use plastics. Malibu, Miami Beach, and Fort Myers have banned plastic straws, while Davis and San Luis Obispo require businesses to ask customers whether they want straws before providing them.

In addition, 10 states have beverage container deposit laws (or bottle bills) that charge customers a deposit on bottles that is refunded when the empties are returned. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, Hawaii enacted

its ban in 2002, but the majority of the laws were passed in the 1970s and 1980s. An alternative approach taken by at least six states focuses on fostering recycling. For example, NCSL reports that Delaware, Maine, and New York require in-store recycling programs for plastic bags.

The plastics industry strongly supports recycling over bans. The American Chemistry Council’s Steve Russell posits in a blog post that many “essential products” are made with plastic “because plastic does its job better than alternatives.” He contends, “While all materials impact the environment, plastics used in many consumer goods typically produce less waste, use less energy, and create fewer greenhouse gas emissions than alternatives.”

Straws and plastic bags take forever to decompose and often end up in the sea



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In response to industry concerns, some states have enacted legislation that prohibits localities from banning single-use plastics. The NCSL counts 10 states that have enacted preemption measures, including Michigan, Idaho, and Mississippi.

A leading nonprofit maintains, however, that bans are a useful tool. The Product Stewardship Institute’s Scott Cassel and Megan Byers emphasize that bans only apply to “non-essential convenience plastics” that can be “easily relinquished or replaced by reusable alternatives.” They surmise: “However one feels about bans as the solution to plastic pollution, one cannot ignore the existing reality: taxpayers and governments are paying the costs for litter cleanups and recycling, not the companies who profit from their manufacture.”

But PSI supports voluntary measures as well, challenging the plastics industry to assist “state and local governments in the U.S. by taking part in extended producer responsibility for packaging, designing plastic products to be safer and more recyclable, helping to expand recycling infrastructure and education, and focusing on the production of high-value products instead of problematic convenience items.”

PSI’s approach is consistent with UNEP’s spot-on assertion: “Ultimately, tackling one of the biggest environmental scourges of our time will require government to regulate, businesses to innovate and individuals to act.”