

What's Happening

IN CALIFORNIA ?

BY LAWRENCE GABLE

VOL 12, NO 5 JANUARY 2011

Local Governments Ban Plastic Bags

Plastic bags have existed for only fifty years, but now they are everywhere. Californians take 19 billion of them home from stores every year. In August 2010 an attempt to ban plastic bags statewide failed. As a result, cities and counties have started passing their own bans.

People who support bans want to protect the environment. For one thing, producing plastic bags uses a lot of oil and energy. For another, even though many plastic bags are recyclable, people do not recycle them as much as glass, aluminum and paper. In fact, they recycle fewer than 5 percent of the bags. Many bags go into the trash and landfills, but they do not decompose.

Many of the bags also end up as litter. They clog sewer systems, get into storm drains and end up on beaches. In fact, in 2009 the Ocean Conservancy reported on trash in waterways and on beaches. It found that plastic bags are second to cigarette butts as the most common form of trash.

Storm drains send the plastic bags into the oceans. There animals mistake them for food. Their stomachs feel full, but really they end up starving. Plastic bags also form a large part of a garbage patch in the Pacific Ocean. Floating, swirling trash covers an area nearly twice the size of Texas. Sunlight breaks bags down into tiny bits of plastic, but they never decompose.



Laws to reduce the number of single-use plastic bags are nothing new. In 2007 San Francisco became the first city in the U.S. to ban them. It limits what large markets and drug stores can offer customers. They may use compostable bags, paper bags made of recycled paper, or reusable bags. The ban has resulted in five million fewer plastic bags per month.

After that a few other places took action.

Malibu, Manhattan Beach, Fairfax and Palo Alto all passed bans. Then when the statewide ban failed, more places made their own laws. In November Los Angeles County passed a ban. By July 67 supermarkets and drug stores must stop offering plastic bags. They also must charge customers 10 cents for a paper bag. Long Beach passed a similar ban in December.

Also in December San Jose passed the strictest ban in the state. It will start in 2012 and ban single-use plastic bags. It also will not allow stores to give away paper bags. Instead they will have to charge customers 10 cents per paper bag in 2012, and 25 cents in 2013.

Now even more cities are considering bans. They too want their residents to bring their own reusable bags to stores. That will reduce the number of bags that litter streets and harm the natural environment.

What's Happening

IN CALIFORNIA ?

BY LAWRENCE GABLE

VOL 12, NO 5 JANUARY 2011

BIOGRAPHY

CAROL MISSELDINE

DIRECTOR, GREEN CITIES CALIFORNIA

As a girl Carol Misseldine already was paying attention to the environment. She wondered why people litter, and she started an organic garden. Those interests became passions, and then they became her profession. Now she is director of Green Cities California. That organization helps cities make good environmental policies.

Carol grew up in Michigan. She loved to play outdoors and climb trees. She also went horse-back riding almost every day. In the winter she sledded and went snurfing, which was an early form of snowboarding. She also went to the public library every week. There she took out the maximum number of books each time.

One day Carol's father got her a book from the library that changed her life. It described problems that humans cause in the natural environment. It also presented ideas on how humans can change what they do. Carol was becoming an environmentalist.

As a teenager Carol's two great interests were horses and ballet. She danced well, but she knew it would not become her career. When she went to college she wanted to learn more about humans and the environment. At Michigan State University she studied Resource Development. In addition to taking classes, she also worked on farms. There she helped farmers find ways to protect soil, save water, and even help wildlife.

After college Ms. Misseldine had jobs related to the environment. For five years she worked for the Michigan Environmental Council. In 2000 she wanted to move to

California though. There she became Oakland's sustainability director. In that position she made the city greener in areas like transportation, energy and water.

In 2006 she and the nine other directors from California imagined forming a new organization. It would help other cities in California develop green policies. So in 2007 they created Green Cities California (GCC), and now Ms. Misseldine leads the organization. Its 13 member cities represent 70 percent of



"A statewide ban on plastic bags is coming."

California's residents.

GCC is working hard to ban plastic bags. It helps cities and counties develop plans for banning them. In fact, Ms. Misseldine's job really is to connect cities with each other. When one member city does something green, GCC shares information about it with the others. That saves them time and work when making their own laws.

Plastic bags are just one of many problems that Carol Misseldine is working on. She no longer dances or rides horses regularly, but she is still fighting for the environment. She knows that when cities make green changes, they become building blocks for larger change.

Background Information

Large retailers would prefer a single, statewide law regarding plastic bags, rather than having to adjust to many different local laws. It would also help cities that want to reduce the number of plastic bags, but do not have the time or resources to develop their own law.

The bill for the statewide ban was AB1998. Governor Schwarzenegger said that he would have signed the bill. Opposition to it came from the American Chemistry Council (a trade association whose members include plastic bag makers) and a plastic bag manufacturer in South Carolina. They preferred a small fee for plastic bags, and greater emphasis on recycling programs.

The statewide ban would have affected grocery and drug stores by 2010, and liquor and convenience stores a year later.

Long Beach's ban will take effect in August 2011. The city studied the issue for three years. It has been promoting recycling, but believes that the recycling effort for plastic bags is not working.

Plastic bags are only 1 percent of Los Angeles County's waste stream, but 25 percent of the county's litter. The county reports that people there get 6 billion plastic bags per year, an average of 1,600 bags per household.

Studies have shown that consumers pay about \$50 per year to supermarkets that have increased their prices in order to cover the cost of bags.

By 2012 Los Angeles County's ban will cover 1,000 stores.

Marin County passed a ban that takes effect Jan. 1, 2012. It deals with outlets and grocery stores on county land, and requires that they charge a nickel for each paper bag.

A month after Manhattan Beach passed its ban, a group representing of plastic bag retailers and a plastic bag recycling company sued the city. It said that the ban violated the California Environment Quality Act. It is now making the same charge against Marin County's ban.

The California Grocers Association supported the statewide ban. The environmental groups Californians Against Waste and Green Cities California did too.

Save the Bay says that a million plastic bags end up in San Francisco Bay every year. According to Greenpeace, 90 percent of all trash floating in the world's oceans is plastic.

Topics for Discussion and Writing

Pre-reading:

- What are some alternatives to getting a plastic bag for one's purchases from the drug store or supermarket?

Comprehension:

- What kinds of things do the different bans require?

Beyond the Text:

- People sometimes call plastic bags "urban tumbleweed." What does that mean?
- Why do you think bans wait six months or a year rather than go into effect immediately?
- Suggest some places where people can keep their reusable bags so that they have them handy when they go to the store.

Vocabulary

Article-specific: statewide; recyclable; landfill; to decompose; litter; to clog; compostable

High-use: to ban; environment; to mistake; to starve; to reduce; strict; to consider

Sources

San Francisco Chronicle December 15, 14, August 8, 2010

Marin Independent Journal December 6, 2010

Sacramento Bee November 30, 2010

Ventura County Star November 30, September 1, 2010

USA Today November 29, October 6, 2010

Los Angeles Times November 19, 17, September 2, 2010

Christian Science Monitor August 30, 2010

Green Cities California www.greencities.org

CA Curricular Standards (4–12)

English-Language Arts

Reading 1.0 Vocabulary Development

2.0 Comprehension (Informational Materials)

Writing 1.0 Writing Strategies

2.0 Writing Applications

ELD—Intermediate and Advanced

Reading Vocabulary Development/Comprehension

Writing Strategies and Applications

Listening and Speaking

Science

4.2; 6.6