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Plastic Left Holding the Bag as Environmental Plague

Nations around world look at a ban

by Joan Lowy

Imagine a world without plastic shopping bags. It could be the future.

There is a growing international movement to ban or discourage the use of plastic bags because of their environmental effects. Countries from Ireland to Australia are cracking down on the bags and action is beginning to stir in the United States.

The ubiquitous plastic shopping bag, so handy for everything from toting groceries to disposing of doggie doo, may be a victim of its own success. Although plastic bags didn't come into widespread use until the early 1980s, environmental groups estimate that 500 billion to 1 trillion of the bags are now used worldwide every year.

Critics of the bags say they use up natural resources, consume energy to manufacture, create litter, choke marine life and add to landfill waste.

"Every time we use a new plastic bag they go and get more petroleum from the Middle East and bring it over in tankers," said Stephanie Barger, executive director of Earth Resource Foundation in Costa Mesa, Calif. "We are extracting and destroying the Earth to use a plastic bag for 10 minutes."

The foundation is calling for a 25 cent tax on plastic bags in California.

A bill that would have imposed a 3 cent tax

Bags add tons to state landfills; recycling comes up short

Every year in Washington state, people throw away about 270,000 tons of plastic bags and wrappings.

That's nearly 5 percent of all garbage going to landfills and incinerators in the state, according to Gretchen Newman, recycling coordinator for the state Department of Ecology.

And plastic bags are a major part of Washington's litter problem, cluttering streets, sticking to trees and polluting water, she said, adding, "It's dangerous for wildlife."

Despite the lightness of their weight, plastic bags and wrappings made up 3 percent of the volume of all litter on state roads and in state and county parks in 2000, the last year tracked by the state, according to an Ecology report. That's 283 tons of bag litter statewide.

Seattle and Bellevue are among the larger cities that collect plastic bags for recycling. In 2001 and 2002, Seattle residents recycled 287 tons of plastic packaging, said Brett Stav of Seattle Public Utilities.

But not everyone bothers to recycle, and in 2002 nearly 5,000

on plastic shopping bags and cups was sidelined in the California Legislature last year after heavy opposition from the retail and plastics industries.

The plastics industry took a "proactive stance" by working with retailers to encourage greater recycling, rather than "putting on taxes to address the problem," said Donna Dempsey, executive director of the Film and Bag Federation, a trade association for the plastic bag industry.

tons of plastic bags went to Seattle's landfill, he said.

King, Pierce and Snohomish counties do not offer plastic bag recycling to their unincorporated-area residents. Although Brooke Bascom of King County's solid waste agency blamed the market, saying there's not enough demand for recycled bags, Seattle's Stav said, "China is a huge developing market. ... There's not a problem with demand." The used bags are made into decking and building materials, he said.

The Seattle Times and Seattle Post-Intelligencer are major contributors to the area's volume of bags. The Seattle Times Co., which handles delivery of both newspapers under a business partnership, estimates it uses 300,000 plastic bags a week -- covering roughly 10 percent of what's distributed, said Times spokeswoman Kerry Coughlin.

The bags are mainly for keeping newspapers dry. Sometimes they carry advertising, she said.

"They can be recycled, and we encourage it," Coughlin said.

The tax proposals are loosely modeled on Ireland's "PlasTax," a levy of about 20 cents that retail customers have had to pay for each plastic bag since March 2002. The use of plastic bags in Ireland dropped more than 90 percent following imposition of the tax, and the government has raised millions of dollars for recycling programs.

Similar legislation was introduced in Scotland last month and is being discussed for the rest of the United Kingdom.

Consumers seem agreeable to giving up the bags, said Claire Wilton, senior waste campaigner at Greenpeace-UK.

"There certainly hasn't been an angry uprising of shoppers (in Ireland) saying we want our bags for free," Wilton said. "I think a lot of people recognize they are wasteful. That's why they try to save them to use again, although they often forget to bring them with them when they shop."

In Australia, about 90 percent of retailers have signed up with the government's voluntary program to reduce plastic bag use. A law that went into effect last year in Taiwan requires restaurants, supermarkets and convenience stores to charge customers for plastic bags and utensils. It has resulted in a 69 percent drop in use of plastic products, according to news reports.

One of the key concerns is litter. In China, plastic bags blowing around the streets are called "white pollution." In South Africa, the bags are so prominent in the countryside that they have won the derisive title of "national flower."

The plastics industry says the solution to bag litter is to change people, not the product.

"Every piece of litter has a human face behind it. If they are a harm to the environment in terms of visual blight, then people need to stop

littering," said Rob Krebs, a spokesman for the American Plastics Council.

One of the most dramatic impacts is on marine life. About 100,000 whales, seals, turtles and other marine animals are killed by plastic bags each year worldwide, according to Planet Ark, an international environmental group.

Last September, more than 354,000 bags -- most of them plastic -- were collected during an international cleanup of coastal areas in the United States and 100 other countries, according to the Ocean Conservancy.

The bags were the fifth most common item of debris found on beaches.

CRACKING DOWN

Some countries are cracking down on the use of plastic bags. Here's a look at the issue:

- About 500 billion to 1 trillion plastic bags are used worldwide every year, according to Vincent Cobb, founder of reuseablebags.com.
- Countries that have banned or taken action to discourage the use of plastic bags include Australia, Bangladesh, Ireland, Italy, South Africa and Taiwan. Mumbai (formerly Bombay), India, also has banned the bags.
- Australians were using nearly 7 billion bags a year, and nearly 1.2 billion bags a year were being passed out free in Ireland before government restrictions, according to government estimates.
- Plastic industry trade associations were unable to provide estimates of plastic bag use in the United States. However, based on studies of plastic bag use in other nations, the environmental group Californians Against Waste estimates Americans use 84 billion plastic bags annually.
- The first plastic sandwich bags were introduced in 1957. Department stores started using plastic bags in the late 1970s and supermarket chains introduced the bags in the early 1980s.
- Overall, the U.S. plastics and related industries employed about 2.2 million U.S. workers and contributed nearly \$400 million to the economy in 2002, according to The Society of the Plastics Industry.

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