

Banning plastic grocery bags

The ubiquitous pieces of light plastic are a nuisance to the land, sea and animals. The state Senate should stand up to the bag industry and ban them by passing AB 1998.

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The Great Pacific Garbage Patch is an area of the ocean larger than Texas and thick with floating plastic debris: bottles, bottle caps, bits of packaging and uncountable plastic bags. It's not surprising that carry-out plastic bags make up so much of the patch; they constitute the third most common trash item found on California beaches, and they're light and easily lifted by the wind. That is just one of many reasons to ban them.

The bags are too flimsy to carry more than a few items, which then commonly roll out of them in the back of the car. Once empty, unless they're quickly stuffed into the garbage or recycling bin, they can waft into the air, floating not only onto beaches but into wilderness areas, where they endanger animals. They rip easily, but paradoxically last for generations in landfills. There's little to like about them aside from their dubious value as pooper scoopers. Californians can easily live without them. Let's do it.

We had initial concerns about a bill by Assemblywoman Julia Brownley (D-Santa Monica) because it would have banned both plastic and paper bags. Shoppers who forgot to bring along reusable bags would have been stuck paying for one, an expense and inconvenience that seemed unreasonable and unnecessary. The bill has since been amended to ban only plastic bags. Consumers would pay a minimum of 5 cents each for paper bags, which are more expensive to produce than plastic ones but less environmentally damaging.

A preferable solution would be a significant fee on all single-use bags; such fees have worked well elsewhere. But as it's now written, the Brownley bill, [AB 1998](#), is a good compromise that will make a real environmental difference at a minimum of inconvenience or cost. It doesn't levy new expenses on grocers or other retailers — the bill has the support of the California Grocers Assn. — and it gives consumers a choice of either paying a few cents for a more environmentally acceptable paper bag or avoiding the cost altogether by bringing reusable totes.

The legislation targets only carry-out bags, not the bags used for grocery produce or, for that matter, those used to protect home-delivered newspapers. The reason for that is twofold: Ubiquitous carry-out bags have been found to do most of the polluting, and practical and inexpensive replacements are readily available.

The Assembly has passed the bill, which will be heard Monday by the Senate Environmental Quality Committee. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has indicated his desire to sign it. The bill is still hotly contested by the plastic-bag manufacturing industry, which has been successful at killing previous attempts to reduce use of the bags. The Senate should pass it nonetheless. This is the easiest and most effective step Californians can take toward cleaning up plastics pollution.