



REDUCING OCEAN LITTER

California may implement a fee for plastic bags and eliminate polystyrene food packaging in a plan to help prevent litter from entering the Pacific Ocean.

Grass trimmings and litter travel through the storm drains of many coastal cities and empty into the Pacific Ocean.

Ocean litter has been shown to affect more than 265 species worldwide, including sea turtles, seabirds, whales, and other marine mammals. Entanglement, ingesting, and drowning are just some of the ways that plastics in the ocean harm and kill marine life. In addition, floating plastic marine debris transports invasive species. For all these reasons, in November 2008 the California Ocean Protection Council (OPC) came up with a comprehensive marine debris action plan that included recommendations for preventing plastic bags, cigarette butts, and other litter from entering the Pacific Ocean. Bills have been introduced in the California Legislature to implement some of the OPC recommendations. Further action on the bills is expected in the 2009 session.

More than 19 billion plastic bags are passed out in California each year, and fewer than five percent are recycled. These bags have an ecological footprint that often starts with shipment from overseas and most likely ends in a landfill or the environment. To reduce our dependence on such disposables, the marine debris action plan recommends charging consumers for the use of single-use plastic bags. San Francisco and Oakland already ban plastic bags. Bills introduced into the legislature would make this a statewide initiative. Regardless of what happens, consumers are encouraged to shift to using reusable bags that are now widely available in supermarkets and other stores. To support this, the Aquarium sells reusable shopping bags in its gift store.

The state's OPC plan would ban smoking on all state beaches and install cigarette butt receptacles at transition points. Research has shown that the ecological impacts of mechanized beach grooming to rid our shores of such litter have detrimental effects on these coastal ecosystems. Not allowing cigarettes on the beach would be part of the

solution to keeping our beaches litter free and to prevent incidental damage from cleanup efforts.

Also to be considered in new legislation as a result of the OPC plan is the mandate that disposable take-out food packages be made from something other than expanded polystyrene foam (EPS), commonly referred to as Styrofoam®. And for many products, manufacturers would need to redesign their packaging to reduce litter. For example, bottle caps, lids, and straws could be tethered to the bottle.

The OPC, which does not make laws or pass regulations, is tasked with several responsibilities. The group coordinates the activities of ocean-related state agencies to improve the effectiveness of state efforts to protect ocean resources within existing fiscal limitations. OPC members establish policies to coordinate the collection and sharing of scientific data related to coastal and ocean resources among agencies. They identify and recommend changes in state and federal law and policy.

The entire OPC implementation strategy can be found online at http://www.resources.ca.gov/copc/docs/opc_ocean_litter_final_strategy.pdf. While much of the action plan can be implemented working within the existing agency structure and regulations, the parts that need new legislation include the statewide ban on polystyrene take-out food containers and charging a fee for plastic bags as well as imposing smoking restrictions on beaches.

Bills to keep an eye on include Assembly Member Julia Brownley's Assembly Bill 68, Senator Jenny Oropeza's Senate Bill 4, and Senator Joe Simitian's Senate Bill 21. As the marine debris action plan comes up for consideration in the 2009-2010 legislative session, it is important that you let your elected representatives know how you feel about this effort to reduce marine debris and the impending legislation.