
State panel floats 'litter tax' to curb debris along coast

By Michael Gardner and Mike Lee

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SACRAMENTO — The influential California Ocean Protection Council has proposed an attack on everyday threats to sea life, including a ban on some popular take-out food containers and fees on plastic and paper bags.

Ocean litter by the numbers

33: Countries with “take back” programs for packaging material

36: Percentage of reduction in polystyrene litter in San Francisco since the city banned the material last year

65: Estimated percentage of litter in the north Pacific Ocean that is plastic

98: Percentage of albatross chicks with plastic in their digestive systems

267: Species worldwide that have been harmed by ocean debris

165,000: Tons of polystyrene used by Californians each year for packaging and food service

SOURCE: California Ocean Protection Council

The panel, which advises the governor and lawmakers, also recommended imposing upfront charges on other packaging commonly left on beaches, such as snack-food bags and candy wrappers. This so-called litter tax also would extend to cigarettes because so many butts are extinguished in the sand.

“We’re putting it out and teeing up the public conversation,” said Mike Chrisman, a member of the council and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger’s Cabinet secretary on natural resource issues.

The proposals must be enacted by the Legislature, which has balked at tax increases and defeated a bill last year to tack a charge on plastic bags at the checkout counter.

There’s also stiff resistance from powerful business interests warning of higher costs during the economic downturn. Makers of plastics said they are taking voluntary steps to cut waste.

Chrisman’s voice is significant because he has a reputation for advocating cautious, business-friendly approaches. But he is convinced that stronger action is imperative to gradually reduce the use of plastic

bags and polystyrene take-out containers.

“We have to deal with it,” he said.

Ocean litter threatens rare sea turtles, sea birds, sea otters and hundreds of other marine species. Many animals mistake litter for food and ingest the potentially deadly debris. Eighty percent of ocean litter comes from land sources, the ocean council said.

“Marine debris is plaguing our oceans,” said Kirsten James, water quality director for Heal the Bay, a Santa Monica-based advocacy group. “In California, we need to do all that we can to prevent any more (garbage) from going into the ocean.”

Trash gets trapped in places where ocean currents and winds converge. One of the most prominent problems is in the North Pacific gyre, where a “trash island” weighing roughly 3.5 million tons floats about 1,000 miles off California's coast.

James said the ocean council's recommendations provide momentum for new state laws. The council, established by the California Ocean Protections Act of 2004, coordinates the activities of ocean-related state agencies and proposes legislative changes.

Lawmakers are expected to introduce measures for reducing ocean litter in coming weeks, but those bills may become tangled in the state's budget morass.

Meanwhile, conservationists are pushing local initiatives.

On Wednesday, the natural resources committee of the San Diego City Council will review a draft ordinance to prohibit major grocery stores and pharmacy chains from providing plastic carry-out bags. Bans or fees on bags have been adopted from San Francisco to Mumbai, India. The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors has voted to impose a ban on such bags if voluntary programs to reduce their use don't succeed.

The measure before the natural resources committee is backed by the environmental group San Diego Coastkeeper, which organizes volunteers to comb beaches for trash.

“The No. 1 item that we see is plastic

