

## Bag bans bring parks a holiday gift

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Griffith Park Maintenance Supervisor Michael Watkins says the bag measures are "definitely working."

As the guy in charge of picking up Griffith Park's litter, Michael Watkins usually dreads this week.

"Easter is our busiest day of the year, by far," says the park maintenance supervisor. "We get about ten times the normal amount of garbage. Doing what I do on the week after Easter is like working at Macy's on Black Friday or being a tax man on April 15."

This year, however, the bunny left a pleasant surprise for Watkins: a notable reduction in one of his least favorite trash items—single-use plastic bags.

"That bag ban the city passed is definitely working," he said. "Usually the wind blows them everywhere—up in the trees, along the fence line. This year, there weren't as many. I can see a huge difference."

In January, after years of analysis and discussion, the City of Los Angeles became the largest city in the nation to ban plastic bags. The ordinance made the city one of [more than 100 California municipalities](#) to outlaw the flimsy, disposable sacks, which can take centuries to decompose, but which are rarely recycled. Used and tossed by the millions, the bags typically end up in landfills after a single use, or blow out onto the streets, storm drains and beaches, where they endanger fish and wildlife.

At the time, opponents of the ban and representatives of the plastic bag industry argued that the bags' environmental impacts were overblown. But as the area covered by bans has grown to encompass about a third of California's population, those on the front lines say they're beginning to see a difference.

A [study done in the aftermath of San Jose's comprehensive 2012 bag ban](#) found that plastic bag litter had dropped by 89 percent in the storm drain system, 60 percent in creeks and rivers and 59 percent in streets and neighborhoods.

"We've been seeing a lot less of them, which is good because they're a real eyesore," says Shawn Wright, a maintenance worker at [Whittier Narrows Recreation Area](#) in unincorporated Los Angeles County, where a [county ban](#) on single use plastic bags has been in place since July 2011.

"Of course, there are still some around, blowing into the lakes and onto the fence line, and we still have all the other debris," Wright said. As usual, he said, it was taking days to clean up the mess left by the tens of thousands of picnickers who had filled—and refilled—the 15-acre park's trash bins on Sunday.

"The little plastic eggs, the candy wrappers, the confetti, the watermelon rinds, the mango peels, the aluminum foil from the barbeques, the charcoal bags . . . "

Maintenance workers noted one downside to the bag bans: Without plastic bags to fall back on, picnickers seemed to have fewer options to consolidate their trash.

"People would use them to carry, say, their hamburger buns into the park, and then put their empty Coke cans and napkins and whatever into them and toss them when they were finished," says Rich Cambaliza, a manager for [Rich Meier's Landscaping](#) in Lancaster, which helps maintain [El Cariso Community Regional Park](#) in Sylmar. "They were a pain in the butt, but people did have them when the trash cans overflowed."

And the bag bans have forced picnickers to improvise with leftovers as well, says Steve Dennis, El Cariso's landscape contract monitor.

"I've been seeing people using our Mutt Mitts—the bags we supply here at the park for dog waste—to take home their leftover barbeque or whatever," says Dennis, laughing that the trick is giving new meaning to the phrase "doggie bag."

"Hey, they're clean and right from the manufacturer. I guess you just have to look past what they're actually supposed to be used for," he laughed.

At Griffith Park, Watkins says cleanup crews enlisted the public's help on Sunday, handing out trash bags and asking them to pitch in. By Tuesday afternoon, he said, the cleanup was almost finished—and he had a new candidate for least-favorite garbage.

"If only we could get people to stop using that damned plastic Easter grass," he said.

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