

Ocean Protection Council proposes statewide ban on plastic bags, containers

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SACRAMENTO — California's Ocean Protection Council staff this week released a draft strategy to reduce and eliminate ocean litter by banning plastic bags and containers statewide.

In support of the OPC's historic resolution last year to eliminate marine debris, the draft recommendations also call for plastic manufacturers to recover and dispose of their products and for product user fees to be assessed.

"There is no question that these kinds of steps are critical if we're going to address the issue of marine debris in a serious way," said state Secretary for Resources Mike Chrisman. "The release of these proposed recommendations will continue our open public dialog on this issue and enhance the discussion about how we may best work together to reduce the threats to our ocean and coast."

The release of the OPC staff draft strategy is designed to set the stage for actions that, when implemented, will have far reaching benefit for ocean health.

If accepted by the OPC, most of the recommendations would require legislation to be enacted.

The implementation strategy identifies three primary approaches that California should take to eliminate marine debris.

California should: (1) establish a "take-back" program for many types of product packaging that would require plastic packaging manufacturers to take these products back and dispose of them properly; (2) institute a statewide prohibition on single-use plastic bags and polystyrene takeout containers; and (3) impose fees on other packaging.

OPC staff is seeking comments on the draft implementation strategy in writing by Aug. 21. Staff will incorporate changes to the draft based on comments received.

The OPC is also soliciting public comment during its meeting Sept. 11 at 9 a.m. in Half Moon Bay. An updated recommended strategy that will include public input will be presented to the OPC for its consideration at this meeting.

On Feb. 8, 2007, the OPC passed a marine debris resolution that identified 13 recommendations for reducing and preventing ocean litter. The council noted that this litter, commonly known as marine debris, harms hundreds of marine species, from birds that eat small pieces of debris and feed it to their young, to marine mammals that get entangled in larger pieces.

According to the Long Beach-based Algalita Marine Research Foundation, 60 to 80 percent of the world's ocean litter is made up of plastic. In some areas, 90 to 95 percent of the marine debris is plastic.

State and local governments spend millions of dollars every year on ocean litter cleanup. In fiscal year 2006, Caltrans spent \$55 million to remove litter and debris from roadsides and highways. Uncollected, most of this will ultimately drain into the ocean.

Marine debris also negatively impacts California's \$46 billion tourism-based ocean-dependent economy. Despite an ongoing effort for decades to reduce ocean litter, the proliferation of plastic debris has increased exponentially.

California communities are not alone in recognizing plastic bags as a significant threat to the marine environment. Several states, including Alaska, Massachusetts, New York, and Washington are considering plastic bag prohibitions. China, Australia, South Africa, Bangladesh, Tanzania, and several other countries recently banned plastic grocery bags. In 2002, Ireland imposed a tax on the distribution of plastic grocery bags that resulted in a 95 percent drop in plastic bag use since the tax was implemented. Whole Foods Market recently stopped offering plastic bags in its nearly 300 stores.

Full and partial polystyrene food container prohibitions have been implemented in many California cities including: Alameda, Aliso Viejo, Berkeley, Calabasas, Capitola, Carmel, Emeryville, Fairfax, Hercules, Huntington Beach, Laguna Beach, Laguna Woods, Los Angeles, Malibu, Millbrae, Oakland, Pacific Grove, Pittsburg, San Clemente, San Francisco, San Juan Capistrano, Santa Cruz, Santa Monica, Scotts Valley and West Hollywood.

The counties of Ventura, San Mateo and Sonoma have also imposed some kind of prohibition as have the cities of Rahway, N.J., Portland, Ore., and Freeport, Maine and Suffolk County, N.Y.

For a copy of the draft implementation strategy or instructions for submitting comments to the OPC, visit the Web site: <http://www.resources.ca.gov/copc/>.

To view the OPC's Feb. 8, 2007 marine debris resolution visit http://www.resources.ca.gov/copc/02-08-07_meeting/Adopted_Marine_Debris_Res_0207.pdf.

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