

Plastic Bags Banned in San Francisco

San Francisco—The Board of Supervisors passed and the mayor signed into law a ban on plastic bags. The ordinance bans San Francisco's chain supermarkets and pharmacies from offering traditional plastic bags to their customers. If the stores continue to pass out bags, they must be reusable, made of recyclable paper, or composed of biodegradable plastic.

To give the stores time to comply, the ban went into effect for supermarkets six months after passage and for pharmacies, one year after passage. The ban only applies to large supermarkets (an estimated 54 are in the city) and to pharmacies with at least five stores in San Francisco.

San Francisco is the first city in the United States to ban plastic bags. Other countries, including Australia, Denmark, Ireland, South Africa, and Switzerland, have imposed taxes, bans, or restrictions on plastic bags.

Plastic bags are an environmental problem, littering cities, clogging storm drains, harming wildlife, and taking up space in landfills. Since they are not biodegradable, they ultimately break down into small bits of plastic. The city of San Francisco uses about 200 million bags each year. It takes 860,000 gallons of oil to produce 200 million plastic bags, which in turn produce 2,000 tons of waste.

San Francisco's ban grew out of a proposal to discourage their use. Supervisors proposed imposing a 17-cent tax on plastic bags at large San Francisco supermarkets. (The city estimated it cost 17 cents in disposal and cleanup costs for each plastic bag dispensed.) Environmentalists supported the tax, and the grocery and plastic industries opposed it. Before supervisors voted on the tax, the mayor intervened and got the major supermarkets to agree to report on how many bags they dispensed during a one year period with a goal of dispensing 10 million fewer plastic bags. In return, the city promised not to impose a tax on the bags.

Later that year, the grocery industry successfully lobbied the California legislature to pass a law against cities' taxing plastic bags or requiring stores to disclose the number of plastic bags they dispense. The law also required large supermarkets to set up in-store recycling programs for plastic bags.

At the end of the one year period after some delay, the supermarkets announced they had dispensed 7.6 million fewer bags. This number was 2.4 million short of the 10 million goal, and the city questioned the reliability of the number.

San Francisco, with a population of over 800,000, is the fourth largest city in California. It is also one of California's 58 counties. Its combined city-county government, unique in California, consists of an elected Board of Supervisors, an elected mayor, and various departments and commissions.

Since California law now forbid it from taxing plastic bags, the Board of Supervisors decided to ban plastic bags at supermarkets and chain pharmacies.

Since San Francisco enacted its ban, nearby cities have enacted similar bans. Supporters hope that more cities and states will ban plastic bags.