

California passes expanded plastic bag ban

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The two identical state bills are on the desk of the governor, who just last week announced investment in 250 recycling sites across the state. | Susanne Pommer/Shutterstock

Despite advocacy from plastic film companies, California lawmakers passed two bills that ban reusable plastic bags in the state, drawing scathing reactions from the industry.

“This ill-advised approval will create a cascade of problems for every Californian,” said Roxanne Spiekerman, spokesperson for the Responsible Recycling Alliance and vice president of public affairs for PreZero US, in a [press release](#). “These lawmakers chose to enact legislation that they know is flawed despite specific examples, studies, and polls that show banning plastic film grocery bags hurts consumers, businesses, is not what Californians want, and does not help the environment or limit plastic waste.”

The RRA is a [coalition](#) of EFS-Plastics, Merlin Plastics and PreZero US, companies with a significant stake in recycled LDPE film.

The bills – [Senate Bill 1053](#) and [Assembly Bill 2236](#) – have been sent to Gov. Gavin Newsom to sign, according to a [news release](#) from state Sen. Catherine Blakespear and Assemblymember Rebecca Bauer-Kahan, who partnered to create the twin bills.

Just last week, Newsom [announced](#) investments in more than 250 [recycling sites](#) across the state, a move the Plastics Industry Association [lauded](#).

The state’s original ban on single-use bags was enacted 10 years ago, and allowed stores to sell customers thicker plastic carryout bags that were considered reusable and met certain recyclability standards, the legislators’ release said. “However, the truth is almost none of those bags are reused or recycled, and they end up in landfills or polluting the environment,” the release added.

“Instead of being asked do you want paper or plastic at checkout, consumers will simply be asked if they want a paper bag,” Blakespear said in the press release. “This easy change eliminates plastic bags from the point of sale and helps California significantly reduce the plastic waste that is contaminating our environment and waters.”

In May, SB 1053 [cleared](#) the California Senate, building on the state’s existing bag ban, which came about as a result of the lawmaker-approved SB 270 in 2014 and voter-upheld Proposition 67 in 2016. California became the [first state](#) with a statewide ban on the thin, lightweight, single-use plastic bags distributed at point of sale in grocery, retail, foodservice and other business establishments.

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The RRA expressed “deep disappointment” at the successful votes, adding that if Newsom signed the bills into law, they would limit shoppers to only paper bag options, “leading to a series of negative unintended consequences for the environment, businesses and consumers.”

“We’re just now starting to see the benefits of the plastic recycling programs introduced via 2016’s SB 270,” said Spiekerman. “If Governor Newsom signs these bills into law, California will undercut a decade of hard work that improved our state’s environment and will effectively have wasted millions of taxpayer dollars invested in this critical effort. Equally concerning is the fact that shoppers will simultaneously lose a convenient way to transport their groceries, and the critical infrastructure that has been built over the last decade to recycle the millions of pounds of plastic waste that already exist.”

The RRA went on to stress that paper bags consume more water and energy to produce and recycle than plastic alternatives, and that a paper-only requirement would increase costs for small- and mid-size grocers, and ultimately for consumers.

Similarly, in an Aug. 19 [press release](#), ahead of the votes, the American Recyclable Plastic Bag Alliance – representing U.S. manufacturers and reclaimers of plastic bags – said the ban would harm both the state’s recycling industry and companies that are working to balance consumer needs and environmental goals, such as member company Crown Poly.

“Our industry recycles 200 million pounds of plastic each year and if we’re no longer operating, that plastic may go straight to our landfills,” said Cathy Browne, general manager of Crown Poly, in the press release.

In August, several legislative staffers [toured](#) Crown Poly’s Huntington Park headquarters, to learn about the company’s efforts to reduce material sent to landfill by using post-consumer or post-industrial recycled plastic.

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