

## Recycling Plastic Bags Helps Protect California's Natural Resources

*By Assemblymember Lloyd Levine*

Paper or plastic? It seems like an innocent enough question, doesn't it? But, when you stop and think about where all the grocery bags we use end up, the question no longer seems quite so simple – particularly in the case of plastic bags.

The numbers are astounding: Californians use more than 19 billion plastic grocery bags each year, creating 147,038 tons of waste in our landfills. With Californians throwing away over 600 bags per second, they are creating enough waste every year to circle the planet over 250 times.

As an avid runner I witness the problem first-hand. Running along the Los Angeles River, I come across thousands of plastic bags on the river banks, in trees, and floating in the river itself. My anecdotal experience was confirmed by the facts: During a recent Los Angeles River cleanup, plastic bags and film constituted 45 percent of the volume of litter collected. Litter collection on beaches and state highways and in cities and counties costs the state \$303.2 million each year.

It became clear to me that we needed to do something. That's why I authored [Assembly Bill 2449](#), which passed both houses of the Legislature and is now waiting the Governor's signature.

Each year millions of seabirds, sea turtles, fish, and marine mammals become entangled in marine debris or ingest plastics they have mistaken for food. According to recent U.S. EPA estimates, marine debris has had a negative impact on at least 267 species around the world. The plastic can constrict an animals' movements and kill marine animals through exhaustion. Animals may starve to death as the plastic clogs their intestines preventing them from obtaining vital nutrients.

Toxic substances present in plastics can cause death or reproductive failure in fish, shellfish and wildlife. In April of 2002, a juvenile Minke whale was found dead on the shores of France. Researchers concluded the cause of death was the approximately two pounds of plastic packaging and supermarket bags found in its stomach.

California's annual Coastal Cleanup and the 1999 Pilot Litter Study by the Department of Conservation found that disposable retail bags are some of the most commonly littered items. Plastic bags are easily carried by wind from uncovered trash cans and dumpsters, vehicles, and solid waste facilities including landfills.

Volunteer coastal cleanups and public education efforts have been helpful in keeping California's coastlines clean, but more needs to be done. To reduce marine debris the amount of waste generated on land must be reduced and disposed of properly.

California needs to ensure that plastic bags are recycled and kept from fouling the environment. While curbside recycling is the most convenient and effective method of collecting items to be recycled, the infrastructure is not in place to allow plastic bags to be placed in curbside recycling bins. If California is to begin to address this problem we need a statewide program until curbside recycling of plastic bags is a reality. My Assembly Bill 2449 is such a program.

Assembly Bill 2449 requires grocery and retail stores to take back and recycle plastic grocery bags. It will make California and Rhode Island the only states in the U.S. with such a program.

When this legislation becomes law, more than 7,000 retail stores in California will be required to prominently display plastic bag recycling bins. With the exception of curb-side recycling, the 7000-plus receptacles represent the greatest number of points of collection for any recycling endeavor in California. The bill also requires stores and bag manufactures to fund an educational campaign to raise awareness of plastic bag recycling and the use of reusable bags.

In addition the legislation requires each store to make reusable bags available for customers to purchase in an effort to reduce the amount of waste created in the first place.

Mark Murray, executive director of Californians Against Waste, said, "AB 2449 is the best recycling bill for plastics we have been able to move in the last 20 years."

In the absence of the multi-pronged program created by AB 2449 we would simply continue to maintain the status quo and that is clearly unacceptable. It is my hope that in the future we will have curbside recycling for plastic bags because that will be the single most effective method for their collection.

Until that time, however, we can accomplish much by making some modest changes in our behavior. For AB 2449 to reach its full potential Californians need to remember to save our plastic bags and return them to the store to be recycled. We also can increase our use of reusable bags. By simply purchasing a few inexpensive reusable bags, keeping them in the trunks of our cars and using them each time we shop, we can make a huge positive impact. They're already doing it in much of Europe.

*Lloyd Levine is Chair of the Assembly Utilities and Commerce Committee*

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