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**Editorial**

## **Paper or plastic or neither**

**A bill in the California Legislature to ban all single-use carry-out bags goes too far.**

April 16, 2010

It's tempting to fantasize about a world without plastic and paper bags, replaced by reusable totes -- until you try to find a substitute pooper scooper or garbage bag for under the sink. The question is how Californians can protect the environment and retain a reasonable level of consumer comfort. Up to now, the state has done deplorably little to reduce plastic bag trash; unfortunately, the latest legislative measure in Sacramento would tilt too far in the other direction.

Sure, something has to be done about all the flimsy plastic bags out there. They're the third most common trash item found on California's beaches (after cigarette butts and plastic bottle caps) and thus a major component of the ocean's floating garbage patches that can stretch as big as the state of Texas. The bags also waft into undeveloped land, snag on bushes and threaten wildlife. Even though they fall apart after a couple of uses, they take generations to degrade in landfills. They're not even all that good for carrying groceries. What's the point of having a bag if it can't hold more than a single half-gallon of milk or a box of cereal?

Just as cities were considering fees on plastic bags, the Legislature, pressured by manufacturers, passed a law forbidding such charges, mandating store-based recycling instead. Those haven't worked. Only 5% of plastic carry-out bags are recycled.

Enter a new bill intended to push the state toward a more effective solution. [Assembly Bill 1998](#), carried by Julia Brownley (D-Santa Monica), would ban all single-use carry-out bags -- plastic and paper -- at supermarkets, convenience stores and large retailers with a pharmacy, such as Walmart and Costco. Customers without reusable shopping totes could buy them at the store.

But is an out-and-out ban really necessary? California could drastically cut down on plastic bag use with a far less draconian measure, by imposing fees on the single-use bags. Such measures have worked well in various places -- including at IKEA, which imposed a 5-cent fee in 2007. Usage dropped 92% in the first year. And although reusable bags are better for the environment than paper bags, paper doesn't present nearly the same environmental threat as plastic.

A better solution would be a modest customer fee on both types of bags -- at all stores. A charge of up to 25 cents per bag would give consumers a strong incentive to bring their own, while allowing others to pay the price if they want to reuse the bags at home for garbage and other purposes. Another advantage is that those who forget their totes wouldn't have to invest several dollars every time for a couple of reusable bags. Californians can have a choice and still go far toward cleaning up the state's plastic garbage heap.