

Pitch plastic bags; Earth will thank us

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Our view: A state legislator's battle to rid California of flimsy plastic bags is one worth fighting.

Just in time for Earth Day comes news that Assemblyman Lloyd Levine's amped-up effort to purge plastic bags has passed its first hurdle on the way to becoming state law.

AB 2058 passed the Assembly Natural Resources Committee on a 5-3 vote last week and now moves to the Assembly Appropriations Committee for its blessing.

The bill continues the Sherman Oaks Democrat's fight against plastic bags: He authored the 2006 bill that requires supermarkets and pharmacies to recycle plastic bags and sell reusable bags. Perhaps an inevitable follow-up to Levine's

first bill, AB 2058 seeks to further clamp down on the number of plastic bags consumed by requiring retailers to demonstrate a 35 percent reduction in their use by July 2011 and a 70 percent reduction by July 2012. Retailers who fail to meet those standards would be required to charge customers a 15-cent fee per bag, the proceeds of which would be used to clean up litter locally.

Levine, a champion of environmental causes, cites the danger errant plastic bags pose to sea birds each year. The environmental and economic costs of clean-up are a one-two punch to the state's bottom line, he says.

The facts support him: Californians use more than 19 billion plastic bags each year, of which only 4 percent are recycled.

Annual clean-up costs to taxpayers are \$285 million.

The California Retailers Association argues that lawmakers should give Levine's first bill more time before establishing fees to discourage use of plastic bags. The in-store recycling programs at grocers and pharmacies began less than a year ago and have already doubled the number of bags being recycled.

We would argue that AB 2058 bill does give retailers time - several years, in fact, to show marked improvement in reducing consumption of flimsy, throw-away bags that, in the end, do little but litter our roads, neighborhoods and waterways.

And, in line with his efforts to treat our environment more kindly and gently by doing away with plastic bags, Levine's bill treats retailers more kindly and gently than a now-stalled sister bill that suggested slapping a 25-cent fee on plastic bags beginning in July 2009.

"Paper or plastic?" It's been a choice between the lesser of two evils for environmentally aware consumers. We applaud Levine's effort to obliterate the question from our shopping lexicon and urge legislators to put AB 2058 on the books.

And, while we're at it, we urge consumers to celebrate Earth Day by doing what they can today. Pitch plastic bags in favor of the reusable versions sold in your local market.