

ENVIRONMENT

What N.J. bag ban would mean for you

Bill awaits Murphy's signature: The measure would be the strictest in the nation

Michael Sol Warren *For The Star-Ledger*

New Jersey is on the verge of adopting the nation's strictest ban on single-use plastics, thanks to a bill passed by state lawmakers on Thursday.

The measure, which curbs the use of plastic and paper takeout bags, plastic straws and polystyrene food containers, aims to shift consumer habits in an effort to fight the constant and growing threat of plastic pollution.

But, if California and New York are indications, the bill could lead to higher uses of heavy plastic trash bags and invite legal challenges.

It's still unclear if or when Gov. Phil Murphy will sign the New Jersey bill, but he has previously expressed support for it.

If the measure does become law, it promises to change some ways New Jerseyans go about their day-to-day lives — after an 18-month grace period.

The thin, single-use plastic bags that are ubiquitous in the food industry would disappear from retail stores, supermarkets, restaurants, coffee shops and food trucks. Instead, customers would need to bring their own reusable bags from home.

The bill includes some exceptions. Plastic bags would still be allowed for things like gathering loose produce, or covering dry cleaning.

Grocery stores would also be banned from handing out paper bags, though other food service businesses would still be allowed to use them. State lawmakers included paper bags in the bill in part because of different environmental concerns: Paper bags take more energy to make and thus produce more greenhouse gases, according to the New York Times.

The New Jersey Food Council, which lobbies on behalf of grocery stores, specifically supported including the ban on paper bags in the bill.

"The ban on paper bags is critically important; they have just as significant of an environmental impact as plastic bags," Linda Doherty, president and CEO of the NJFC, said in a statement after the bill was passed. "Without this ban, consumers would have simply moved to paper single-use bags, failing to address the under-

lying goal of reducing our reliance on single-use products."

State Sen. Bob Smith, D-Middlesex, who is a primary sponsor of the bill, said he expects residents will quickly adapt to relying on reusable bags. He added that he thinks there is overwhelming support for plastic bans, as the public learns more about the extent of plastic pollution and the public health threat it poses.

"It's not just that this is costing you money to put it into a landfill — it's your health," Smith said.

PUBLIC EDUCATION CAMPAIGN

But to help residents adjust, the bill allocates \$500,000 each year for three years to fund a public education campaign, and to hand-out free reusable bags. Smith estimates the state will hand out about 2 million bags through this program.

Beyond the bags, the bill also outlaws the use of polystyrene food containers, like Styrofoam plates and cups. There are exceptions to this as well, including an allowance for butcher trays that are used to handle raw meat.

Businesses could seek a waiver from the polystyrene ban by appealing to the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection. The bill allows for such waivers when "there is no feasible and commercially available alternative for a specific polystyrene foam food service product" or "the person or food service business has less than \$500,000 in gross annual income and there is no reasonably affordable, commercially available alternative to the polystyrene foam food service product."

Finally, the bill prevents restaurants from handing out plastic straws unless a customer requests one.

On the other side of the country California could offer a glimpse into New Jersey's future.

California voters approved that state's single-use plastic bag ban in 2016. The Golden State's rule also places a 10-cent fee on paper bags.

Just like in New Jersey — where dozens of cities, towns and counties have already



passed local plastics restrictions — California had 139 different local ordinances in effect before the statewide ban was approved, according to NPR.

A study published in 2019 by University of Sydney economist Rebecca Taylor focused on those local California measures and found they had been effective in cutting plastic waste. But Taylor's research also found that sales of small trash bags soared in the Golden State, as people who normally would've used the takeout bags for dog feces or small trashcans sought new options.

New York adopted a ban on single-use plastic bags in 2019, according to the New York Times.

That ban was to go in effect in March. After a court battle, New York will begin enforcing its ban on Oct. 19, the state announced recently.

A man carries groceries in reusable bags in Jersey City. Plastic and paper grocery bags could soon be banned in the Garden State.

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