



March 2019

California's Plastic Police Always on The Job

BY KERRY JACKSON

It was inevitable. California lawmakers' assault on choice continues in 2019. The plastic-bag ban already in effect is not enough to satisfy their appetite for micromanaging others' lives.

After successfully outlawing single-use plastic bags in grocery stores and other large retailers, with the help of voters in a 2016 ballot initiative, and cracking down on plastic straws, Sacramento has dreams of becoming even more invasive.

Assembly Bill 1080 and Senate Bill 54 require single-use plastic packaging sold or distributed in the state to be reduced or recycled by 75 percent by 2030. On or after 2030, all single-use packaging and products distributed are to be recyclable or compostable.

The law would apply to molded containers, soft drink containers, and even detergent bottles.

It's another sound-and-fury moment for lawmakers. There's a lot of talk about their noble efforts to keep the oceans clean – much of it from themselves – but unless California laws carry the weight of authority overseas, little they do will matter.

The Hemholtz Centre for Environmental Research in Germany has found that roughly 90 percent of all plastic in the oceans is carried by “the top 10 rivers with the highest loads” of plastic debris, eight in Asia and two in Africa.

Yet a heavy burden will land on manufacturers if the bills become law. As currently written, the bills demand that single-use plastic packaging or products must show a 20 percent recycle rate by 2022, and a 40 percent rate by 2026.

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It's unclear how manufacturers are supposed to guarantee that their products are dutifully handled after they have been delivered to customers. Will they be held responsible for others' actions?

There's also the question of the costs manufacturers and their employees will incur. At least one company has been driven out of business since Los Angeles expelled plastic bags within the city, according to reports. How many more will follow as the war on plastic continues?

The prohibitionists deflect concerns about the impact of bans on single-use plastic bag manufacturers by hyping the benefits that will accrue to companies making reusable bags. They never consider that it's not elected officials' place to use government's ever-expanding powers to play favorites and shape the marketplace. A government that does so has gone well outside the bounds it is expected to operate in within a free society.

Favoritism is the foundation undergirding the entire plastophobia movement. While the U.S. produces only about 1 percent of all ocean plastic, meaning the amount of plastic in the oceans coming out of California is near zero, California companies and consumers – who are paying maybe as much as \$2 billion a year for the plastic bag ban – are nevertheless punished as if they are the primary, if not sole, source of the problem.

The choice robbers argue that making the innocent pay for crimes of the guilty is justifiable because California law will inspire other states to follow us and enact their own prohibitions. But again, what's the use? The guilty parties will not be held responsible while U.S. consumers will continue to have their choices stripped away in exchange for no tangible reduction in ocean pollution.

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State lawmakers, who also want to ban paper store receipts, are not alone in their rush to expand their green street cred. Cities want to interdict plastic utensils, polystyrene food containers, and any and all other items that displease the environmentalist lobby. Policymakers across California are so intensely focused on their narrow agenda, it's as if all other problems in the state have been solved.

Yet the state remains mired in a housing crisis; is facing a painful reckoning with its wobbling public-employee pension system; doesn't know how to humanely clear the homeless off its streets; and is threatened by an antiquated income-tax system. Sacramento won't pursue reasonable solutions to the man-made drought and wildfire destruction; refuses to curb its appetite for more taxes; and remains preoccupied with "owning" President Trump.

But ridding the state of plastic, that's a task lawmakers have no trouble getting around to.

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