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NEW STATE LAW PROMOTES PLASTIC GROCERY BAG RECYCLING

Starting today, many California grocery stores & retailers will be required to collect and recycle plastic grocery bags.

State law AB 2449, effective today, establishes a six-year pilot program requiring all supermarkets and large retailers to take back and recycle plastic grocery bags. The bill also requires retailers to provide consumers with education about bag reuse opportunities.

The new law applies only to supermarkets that has over 10,000 square feet of retail space, charges tax and has a pharmacy.

All affected stores must use plastic bags labeled *Please Return to a Participating Store for Recycling*. Stores must also place recycling bins in visible and accessible locations for customers to recycle their plastic bags and must provide reusable bags for customers to purchase and use in lieu of disposable ones.

In addition, plastic bag manufacturers are required to work with the grocery stores on their programs to help ensure the proper collection, transportation and recycling of the plastic bags.

Legislators and environmentalists alike hope that the passage of AB2449 will increase the amount of plastic bags that are recycled. Before the adoption of AB 2449, there were no convenient options to recycle plastic grocery bags in Davis, so waste reduction efforts were focused reusing bags.

“It’s great to finally have an easy way to recycle plastic grocery bags,” says Jennifer Franceschine, Conservation Coordinator for the City of Davis. “The City of Davis Recycling Program still encourages reuse as of bags as well. Reuse is better than recycling because it saves energy. Plastic grocery bags can be reused for many things—packing a lunch, carrying things and lining garbage cans inside your home.”

As part of the legislative compromise to gain adoption of the bill, the bill also contains language that would pre-empt local agencies in California from adopting fees and recycling requirements on affected retailers.

While some recycling advocates are promoting an outright ban on all plastic grocery bags, Franceschine urges caution on such legislation.

“It’s important to keep in mind the big picture and what is best for the environment,” said Richard Tsai, Senior Utility Resource Specialist for the City of Davis. “For example, if plastic grocery bags are no longer available, people who reuse plastic grocery bags for lining trash cans or other uses would have to buy trash bags instead. These trash bags are made of thicker plastic film than grocery bags and are usually packaged in boxes that are wrapped in plastic—meaning more overall waste than reusing a single plastic grocery bag.” Not only is the extra waste an issue, he says, but the thicker plastic will take longer to break down in the landfill.

“The main reason plastic bags are such a hot issue,” said Franceschine, “is that the bags are considered a disposable item—used only to carry groceries home and then discarded. However, if reuse and recycling of plastic bags were promoted instead of an outright ban on all plastic bags, the picture changes slightly, and plastic bags do not look as bad.”

Nugget, Longs, Albertsons and Safeway in Davis have already been selling reusable bags and offering plastic bag recycling for months already. Other local stores not affected by AB 2449 such as Davis Ace Hardware are showing their environmental stewardship by selling reusable bags.

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