

CALPIRG



CALPIRG State Director Jenn Engstrom speaks at an event calling to strengthen California's ban on single-use plastic grocery bags. Credit: Andy Smith

BEYOND PLASTIC

Why we need a new plastic bag ban in California

We've known for a long time that single-use plastic bags are wasteful. They create plastic pollution in our communities and threaten our health and the environment. And since most plastic takes hundreds of years to fully degrade, almost every bit of that plastic will still be out there piling up in landfills, littering our streets, and polluting our environment for generations to come.

How microplastics can threaten your health

When plastic breaks down, it turns into smaller and smaller pieces called microplastics. These microplastics have been found in every part of the globe, from the highest mountain peaks to the deepest ocean trenches. Microplastics are also being found in human bodies, potentially exposing us to harmful compounds that can impact our health.

Nothing we use for a few minutes should threaten our health and pollute our environment for hundreds of years—especially when it's “stuff” we don't need.

The original bag ban you helped pass needs to be updated

Member support and action helped us pass California's original bag ban. But the plastic companies circumvented the 2014 law that was supposed to ban bags at the checkout counter. We're working to update the law so that it bans all plastic carryout bags at grocery stores in California, including the slightly thicker plastic bags that are common at checkout stands today, which plastic companies claim are reusable.

The reality is that few people actually reuse thicker plastic bags. Instead they end up as trash and harm our environment just as much

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FALL 2024

Staff



Closing California's plastic bag ban loophole will help reduce plastic waste in the state.

as the thinner ones do. Because they are thicker, plastic bag waste by weight actually increased in the last few years to the highest level on record.

Together we can get rid of plastic bags once and for all

The good news is that the California recently approved legislation that would fix the bag ban and prohibit all plastic film bags from being provided at grocery stores in California.

In August, the state's Senate and Assembly passed identical bills that would strengthen California's ban on single-use plastic grocery bags. Their passage marks an important step in addressing California's plastic waste crisis by closing a loophole that allows grocery stores to provide thick plastic bags for a fee. The bills now need to be signed into law by the governor.

We know well-designed plastic bag laws work and are effective at reducing plastic pollution. For example, New Jersey banned all plastic bags at stores and restaurants, and data from the New Jersey Plastics Advisory Council estimates the law eliminates 5.51 billion plastic bags per year.

An updated bag ban will make a big impact

As the fifth largest economy in the world and a state known for its iconic coastline, California has the potential to make a huge impact in reducing plastic waste and protecting vulnerable ocean ecosystems. And if we build enough public support, we can win.

CALPIRG has a long history of effectively reducing plastic waste. Most recently, we helped pass the Plastic Pollution Producer Responsibility Act, which requires that all single-use plastic foodware and containers be recyclable by 2032. We've seen time and time again that when we combine the power of public opinion with strategic advocacy, we can win.

Once we successfully get rid of single-use plastic bags, we'll notice cleaner parks, streets, beaches and waters, decreased exposure to toxic materials for humans and wildlife, and less waste choking our planet.

With the action and support of members like you, together we can strengthen California's ban on plastic bags.

NEWS BRIEFS

CONSUMER WATCHDOG

You have new rights and protections when you fly

Most of us have experienced the frustrations of flight delays, cancellations and unexpected airline fees. Thankfully, Congress recently passed the Federal Aviation Administration Reauthorization Act, introducing significant new protections for passengers. Requirements phase in, mostly between now and summer 2025.

The new law requires airlines to issue prompt refunds for canceled or significantly delayed flights and mandates that travel vouchers be valid for at least five years. Airlines must also provide 24/7 customer service and eliminate fees for children under 14 to sit with a parent or adult companion. In addition, airlines that violate the law will face increased maximum civil penalties—up to \$75,000 from the current \$25,000 per violation.

Unfortunately, the bill did not codify into law up-front disclosure of bag fees or fees incurred by consumers for changing or canceling their booking, as required in a new Department of Transportation (DOT) rule. But those changes will start phasing in next year.

"We're disappointed that Congress chose not to make DOT's rule on fee transparency the law

OUR MISSION

When consumers are cheated or the voices of ordinary citizens are drowned out by special interest lobbyists, PIRG speaks up and takes action. We uncover threats to public health and well-being and fight to end them, using the time-tested tools of investigative research, media exposes, grassroots organizing, advocacy and litigation. PIRG's mission is to deliver persistent, results oriented public interest activism that protects consumers, encourages a fair, sustainable economy and fosters responsive democratic government.

NEWS BRIEFS

of the land and concerned that this will make passenger rights more confusing,” said PIRG Consumer Watchdog Teresa Murray. “We’ll keep urging Congress and DOT to look for additional opportunities to enhance consumer protections.”

RIGHT TO REPAIR

California celebrates repair independence

After years of organizing, California’s Right to Repair Act went into effect on July 1. The new law gives Californians expanded access to the parts, tools, software and information we need to keep devices working longer. This saves Californians money and limits the toxic electronic waste in our landfills and environment.

With the freedom to repair, we finally have the liberty to fix our phones, computers, appliances and other devices ourselves or choose a professional repair person, instead of being tethered to the manufacturer.

For too long, electronics manufacturers have controlled the products they make long after we’ve bought them—requiring us to use their repair services or buy a new device.

These repair restrictions lead to electronic waste, the fastest growing waste stream in the world. In fact, Californians throw away 772,000 tons of e-waste per year, which often contains toxic heavy metals.

That’s why we mobilized our members and the public to pass the Right to Repair Act last year. After five years of strategic advocacy and grassroots organizing supported by people like you, we finally won.

CONSUMER PROTECTION

50 years of challenging outrageous consumer abuses

In July, friends and colleagues came together in Washington, D.C., to celebrate PIRG’s Ed Mierzewski’s 50th anniversary of advocating for consumers and the public interest.

Ed oversaw PIRG’s federal consumer program, helping to lead national efforts to improve consumer credit reporting laws, identity theft protections, product safety regulations, and more.



Ben Lohrenz

He was a co-founder of the coalition Americans for Financial Reform, which fought for the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act of 2010, including as its centerpiece the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB). He was awarded the Consumer Federation of America’s Esther Peterson Consumer Service Award in 2006, Privacy International’s Brandeis Award in 2003, and numerous annual “Top Lobbyist” awards from The Hill and other outlets.

Over his long career, Ed has stood up for consumers over and over again, winning many protections along the way. Ed may be the reason why you can confidently buy a car that won’t be a clunker, get a free credit report or freeze your credit to protect yourself against fraud, or get financial relief from the CFPB when you’ve been wronged in the marketplace.

Cheers to you, Ed, and thank you for being our consumer advocate.

CALPIRG celebrated Repair Independence Day in June after the state Right to Repair law went into effect by hosting workshops demonstrating how consumers could repair their own electronics.

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CITIZEN AGENDA • FALL 2024



TOP STORY: Why we need a new plastic bag ban in California

California's ban on plastic bags isn't working. The result? More plastic waste, and single-use bags that can't be recycled.

BEYOND PLASTIC

You spoke up about plastic. Amazon is starting to listen.

Good news: On June 20, Amazon announced that by the end of this year, it will phase out plastic air pillows—those air-filled plastic film bags that show up in many of your packages—from its shipments in North America. Once it phases them out completely, the company will avoid the use of 15 billion air pillows per year.

The announcement came on the heels of another step Amazon took to reduce its use of plastic packaging.

In 2023, after receiving 138,000 petition signatures from supporters and members like you, Amazon announced its plans to phase out plastic-padded shipping bags and replace them with “more recyclable alternatives.”

Amazon is headed in the right direction, but there's still more the retail gi-



PIRG staff and volunteers deliver more than 97,000 Valentine's Day petition signatures to Amazon headquarters in February 2023.

ant can do. Amazon should phase out all single-use plastic packaging and commit to ambitious deadlines for doing so.

By raising our voices together, we can convince Amazon to continue to reduce its reliance on plastic packaging.

FEATURED STAFF



Staff

Jenn Engstrom: Jenn directs CALPIRG's advocacy efforts and is a leading voice in Sacramento and across the state on protecting public health, standing up for consumers and defending our democracy. Previously, as the deputy national director for the Student PIRGs, she helped run our national effort to mobilize hundreds of thousands of students to vote.

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