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<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=89135360>

## San Francisco Plastic Bag Ban Interests Other Cities

by David Gorn

March 27, 2008

In San Francisco, the age-old question "Paper or plastic?" was answered one year ago this week. The city banned hard-to-recycle plastic bags in grocery stores, and so far, that translates into 5 million fewer plastic bags every month. Now, other cities are considering similar bans, and companies are developing alternatives to disposable bags.

San Francisco politician Ross Mirkarimi didn't know just what a stir he was going to cause. On March 27, 2007, the city passed his bill to eventually ban plastic bags from all the city's grocery stores and pharmacies. And now, cities across the United States, including Boston, Portland, Ore., and Phoenix, are considering similar bans.

"This has probably been one of the most interesting wildfires of common sense, and I'm delighted and proud that San Francisco was the first city in the United States to have kick-started this," Mirkarimi says.

And not just in the U.S. Mirkarimi says Paris and London contacted him and now have passed similar bans.

In the U.S., the ban has had a few unintended consequences in the marketplace. North of San Francisco in the small town of Oroville, one manufacturer of plastic bags actually got a boost in business.

Roplast Industries makes large, thick, reusable plastic bags. They contain more plastic than the flimsy, single-use bags, but in the long-term, says Roplast President Robert Bateman, they're better for the environment.

The company's bag "will hold five or six times as much as the standard disposable bag," he says. "And it is reusable. It can dramatically change the amount of plastic used."

Of course, those thicker, heavier plastic bags are still plastic. If you don't like that idea, Roplast has another choice — [compostable plastic bags](#). Compostable plastic may seem like a contradiction in terms. But Bateman says it makes sense to use plastic that degrades.

Critics point out they degrade but they don't biodegrade. That is, they break down, but they just break down into smaller bits of plastic.

Just up the highway, in the town of Chico, Andy Keller has another idea — the [ChicoBag](#), an environmentally friendly nylon-fiber carrying bag that folds up into a tiny wallet-sized stuff sack. When the ChicoBag is held in the palm of your hand, it looks like a really, really tiny sleeping bag.

"People carry them in their back pocket or their purse or their cup holder or the glove compartment of their car, and it allows them to have a bag whenever they need it," Keller says.

California's grocery store industry would like to keep its plastic bags. They're cheaper than paper, and the industry says it wants to offer customers choice — paper, plastic and reusable bags. The plastics industry has been more aggressive, trying to halt plastic bag bans before they can start.

The Bay Area city of Fairfax last week abandoned its bag ban under threat of a lawsuit by the plastic bag industry. Fairfax has about 7,000 residents, and Mayor Mary Ann Maggione says there's no way it could handle a lengthy lawsuit.

The plastics industry said it would sue on environmental grounds. Sharon Kneiss of the American Chemistry Council says that, by banning plastic, Fairfax was giving a tacit endorsement to use paper bags, which could hurt the environment.

"Bans on plastic bags are not a good environmental choice," she says. "Bans aren't the answer, recycling is the answer."

The town of Fairfax, though, isn't giving up. It's made its ban voluntary, and Maggiore says that most shopkeepers have stopped handing out plastic bags. On top of that, advocates in Fairfax plan to take on the plastic bag industry again. They expect to put the issue on a ballot in June.

## **No Plastic**

[About the San Francisco Plastic Bag Ban](#)  
[San Francisco Plastic Bag Ordinance](#)

## **Plastic Bag Laws Spread**

*Cities around the world are moving to ban plastic shopping bags to protect the environment. A roundup:*

- In April 2007, Leaf Rapids, a town of about 550 people in Canada's Manitoba, became the first municipality in North America to adopt a law forbidding the use of plastic bags by shops. The law calls for fines of as much as 1,000 Canadian dollars, though no one has yet received one, a town official says. Local businesses offer reusable cloth bags as an alternative.
- In March 2007, San Francisco became the first city to ban common plastic shopping bags. At least 30 villages and towns in Alaska have followed suit.
- In January, the New York City Council voted to require large stores and retail chains to recycle plastic bags.
- The following U.S. cities are considering fees or bans of plastic bags: Austin, Texas; Bakersfield, Calif.; Boston; New Haven, Conn.; Portland, Ore.; Phoenix; and Annapolis, Md.
- In Germany, stores provide consumers with the option of a plastic bag or a canvas- or cotton-made tote — for a fee. Many German consumers carry their own bags when doing the shopping and it's not uncommon to see some using wicker baskets or wheeled carts. Stores that offer plastic bags have to pay a recycling fee.
- In January, China announced a ban on stores handing out free plastic shopping bags. The ban takes effect June 1, two months before Beijing hosts the Summer Olympics. The measure will eliminate the flimsiest plastic bags and force stores to offer more durable bags.
- Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania's Zanzibar islands have banned flimsy plastic, introducing minimum thickness requirements. Many independent supermarkets in Kenya's capital, Nairobi, now charge a small fee for each plastic bag but also give away a free, reusable basket with a minimum purchase.
- In 2003, Ireland introduced a 22-cent levy on every plastic shopping bag. That, the government said, resulted in a big drop in the number of bags that stores were handing out. Some switched to paper bags; others stopped handing out bags completely. In July 2007, Ireland raised the fee to 32 cents.
- Shopkeepers in the English town of Modbury, which has about 1,500 residents, eliminated disposable plastic bags, while some of the country's big grocery chains have offered customers money-saving incentives to reuse old bags.
- The Swedish government is encouraging plastic bag producers to continually develop greener bags. Two of the Nordic country's biggest grocery chains have made biodegradable paper bags and reusable cloth bags available to shoppers.

*From the Associated Press*