

# San Francisco Chronicle

## Plastic bags found to severely threaten bay

Kelly Zito, Chronicle Staff Writer

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Despite Bay Area cities' attempts to curb the use of plastic bags, an environmental watchdog group estimates nearly 1 million bags from supermarkets, drugstores and corner shops end up in and along San Francisco Bay each year.

In their fourth annual report on the most garbage-strewn sites in the region, to be released today, Save the Bay said plastic bags remain a severe threat, clogging wetlands, strangling wildlife and harming water quality. The 50-year-old environment advocacy group zeroed in on 10 hot spots ringing the bay where a total of almost 15,000 plastic bags were retrieved in one day last year.

Many of the spots are shorelines, creek mouths and storm drain outfalls where trash accumulates because of water runoff, winds and tides as well as illegal dumping.

The locations include Candlestick Park and Warm Water Cove in San Francisco, the Albany-Berkeley-Emeryville shoreline, the Antioch shoreline and Mare Island Strait. Plastic bags were the second-most-gathered item after cigarette butts, said David Lewis, executive director of the group.

Lewis said the study focused on plastic bags for the first time this year because cities in the region are grappling with ways to slash this pervasive form of waste. San Francisco, Palo Alto and Fairfax have enacted bans on plastic bags; others such as San Jose, Berkeley and Santa Cruz are considering bans.

"We're encouraging cities in the Bay Area to stand up to the plastics industry and take the lead in making it easy for people to do the right thing by placing restrictions on these plastic bags," Lewis said.

### **Average use time: 12 minutes**

According to their research, Californians use about 19 billion plastic bags each year, 3.8 million in the Bay Area. The average use time for the bags - made using about 12 million barrels of oil each year in the United States - is about 12 minutes. In addition to the hundreds of years it can take for a plastic bag to decompose in a landfill, the bags also force downtime when fed into traditional recycling equipment. Typically, the bags get wound into conveyor belts or gears and must be cut out by hand.

In spite of those drawbacks, the plastic bag industry, represented by the American Chemistry Council, says plastic bag bans or taxes are not the answer. For one, spokesman Keith Christman said, the bans simply push most consumers toward paper bags, which aren't necessarily that much more eco-friendly (San Francisco requires paper bags made of recycled paper).

Instead, they say more cities and states must encourage consumers to take plastic bags back to where they came from - supermarkets that take in plastic bags for recycling. Many communities, including San Francisco, do not allow for residential recycling of plastic bags because of the aforementioned problems with choking up machines.

But San Francisco's 2007 ban on plastic bags from big grocery and drugstores means that those stores don't *have* to take bags in for recycling, Christman said.

"The best way to (reduce plastic bag litter) is by taking them back to grocery stores," which bale the bags and sell them to specialized recycling processors, he said.

### **30% bring own bags**

By San Francisco's account, the bag ban is working. The city's main recycling center reports a 5 to 10 percent decrease in plastic bag volume, and the traffic in reusable bags made of canvas, mesh and durable plastic is on the rise.

"On an anecdotal basis, as many as 30 percent of people in grocery stores are bringing in their own bags," said Mark Westlund, spokesman for San Francisco's Department of the Environment. "That's the real goal here."

### **Talking trash about bags**

-- 1.37 million plastic bags were picked up by volunteers during the Ocean Conservancy's 2008 International Coastal Cleanup Day, second only in number to cigarette butts.

-- Californians use approximately 19 billion plastic bags and 5 billion paper bags annually.

-- Bay Area residents use 3.8 billion plastic bags every year. Each year about

1 million end up in the bay.

-- 12 million barrels of oil are used to produce 30 billion plastic bags in the United States every year.

E-mail Kelly Zito at [kzito@sfchronicle.com](mailto:kzito@sfchronicle.com).

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