

## Hawaii first state to ban plastic bags at checkout

By Miguel Llanos, NBC News  
November 10, 2012, 8:49 pm

NBCNews.com

By now, it's hardly news when a city bans plastic bags at checkout counters -- but an entire state? That's happened in Hawaii, where Honolulu County has joined the state's three other counties to give Hawaii a first-in-the-nation title.

"Passing the bans did take an effort -- change always does -- but people seemed to understand the need for such an effort," Robert Harris, director of the Sierra Club's Hawaii chapter, told msnbc.com of the two-year campaign across the islands.

The Honolulu County Council approved the ban late last month and Honolulu Mayor Peter Carlisle, who is also the county executive, initially held back his support, saying he wanted to collect more public input due to enforcement and cost concerns.

But when he signed the ban on Thursday, Carlisle was fully committed, especially since retailers were given three years to comply.

"This is groundbreaking. By signing this environmentally friendly bill, Honolulu joined our neighbor island counties," Carlisle said. "Hawaii has become the only state in the United States where every county has plastic bag legislation."

The county law bans non-biodegradable plastic bags at checkout as well as paper bags that are not at least 40 percent recycled. Retailers in Honolulu County have until July 1, 2015, to make the change.

That date "gives us plenty of time to get ready," Carlisle told msnbc.com. "Retailers will be able to use up their inventory of bags and make arrangements to educate the public on the importance of bringing their own bag."

Kauai and Maui counties already enforce bans, while Hawaii County's ban takes effect on Jan. 17, 2013.

The Sierra Club organized rallies to support the bans, said Harris. "We also lobbied extensively for statewide legislation, which failed, but it helped direct attention to the issue and eventually got the last county to take action."

"Being a marine state, perhaps, we are exposed more directly to the impacts of plastic pollution and the damage it does to our environment," Harris said in explaining the support in all four counties. "People in Hawaii are more likely to be in the water or in the outdoors and see the modern day tumbleweed -- plastic bags -- in the environment."

Getting shoppers to switch to reusable bags is another matter.

Island supermarkets, which said they would prefer to charge a nickel or dime for plastic bags rather than live with a ban, argued that most shoppers have shifted to paper bags, which have their own environmental impact and increase store costs.

The Surfrider Foundation, which also lobbied for the bans as part of its mission to protect beaches and oceans, acknowledged the challenge ahead.

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"While we are excited that the plastic bag bans have been enacted, there has been a reported increase in paper bag use from locals," Bill Hickman, the nonprofit's point man in Hawaii for plastics, said in a blogpost Monday. He added that his group might even lobby for a fee on paper bags at some point.

The state-level legislation, which would have charged users 10 cents per plastic bag, died a quiet death earlier this month, just two weeks after being introduced. A statewide ban also recently failed in California, noted Harris.

Ted Duboise, publisher of PlasticBagBanReport.com, said he doesn't think any state is close to a ban enforced at the state level. "Too much political hem haw," he told msnbc.com.

As for a national ban, don't hold your breath, said Duboise, citing "labor, lobbyist and plastic industry interests."

Still, the number of areas with bans or bag fees has grown across the U.S. and the globe. Dozens of areas on every continent but Antarctica are listed on an interactive map at PlasticBagBanReport.com.

So is the lesson here that it's easier to get bans at the local level?

"In Hawaii, yes," said Harris. "And looking to the mainland, I would suspect the same."

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