

leading agitators for plastic bag regulations. He created the “bag monster,” a costumed character that dons 500 plastic bags—the number that, by Keller’s estimate, is used each year by the average consumer. The bag monster, he says, attempts to “show people what I saw in the landfill that day.” The character appears at city council meetings and antibag demonstrations throughout the state.

Keller and his allies appear to be on the march. Nearly 100 local bag restrictions have passed throughout California. And just last month, legislators in the state capital of Sacramento became the first in the U.S. to approve a statewide plastic bag ban.

Regulations have caught on outside of California as well. Chicago aldermen approved a ban on plastic bags in the spring. The New York City Council is considering a fee on both paper and plastic bags. Virginia Congressman Jim Moran (D) has even, on a couple of occasions, introduced a bag bill in the U.S. House of Representatives.

To environmental activists, plastic bags are among the most visible symbols of a throwaway culture. They say the bags are a frivolous use of hydrocarbons. They foul equipment in recycling facilities and aren’t themselves recycled in appreciable amounts.

But the most consistent complaint about the bags is litter. Activists call them “urban tumbleweeds.” And beyond being an eyesore, the bags have a propensity to settle in waterways and get carried out to sea. There, opponents say, they cause real ecological harm.

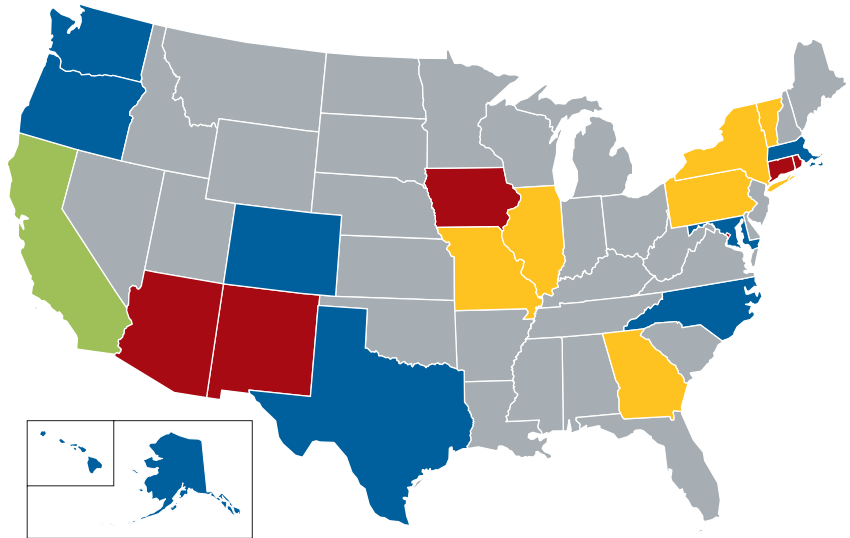
The plastic bag industry, not surprisingly, seeks to preserve its hard-won business and sees the attack on bags as part of a broader assault on all plastics. Industry representatives and other bag defenders deny that litter is a big enough problem to warrant regulation that would kill their industry and inconvenience the consumer. They further argue that the bags are more sanitary and more environmentally benign than the alternatives.

PLASTIC OCEANS

The plastic bag so familiar today is the T-shirt bag, so called because of its resemblance to an undershirt. It is usually made out of high-density polyethylene, a pound of which makes between 60 and 70 bags.

The T-shirt bag was invented in Sweden in the 1960s and popularized in the U.S.

SPREADING RESTRICTIONS Plastic bag legislation, originally mostly a West Coast phenomenon, is taking root throughout the U.S.



■ Multiple jurisdictions with regulations

Alaska Several communities have instituted plastic bag regulations. Two of them, in Fairbanks and Homer, have been repealed.

Colorado A few towns, including Boulder, have adopted bag legislation.

Hawaii Four of five Hawaii counties, including Hawaii and Honolulu, have banned plastic bags.

Maryland Montgomery County passed a 5-cent fee on plastic bags, effective in 2012. Bags are banned in Chestertown.

Massachusetts Nantucket banned plastic bags in

1990. Several other communities followed.

North Carolina Plastic bags have been banned in three barrier island counties.

Oregon Plastic bags have been banned in three cities, including Portland.

Texas The capital, Austin, banned plastic bags last year. Dallas is making a 5-cent fee effective next year.

Washington The state’s 12 bag ordinances are second only to California’s. Seattle banned single-use plastic bags in 2012.

■ Single jurisdiction with regulation

Arizona Bisbee banned plastic bags and instituted a charge for paper bags, effective this year.

Connecticut Plastic bags are banned in Westport.

Iowa Marshall County banned bags in 2009.

New Mexico Santa Fe banned plastic bags this year.

Rhode Island Barrington banned plastic bags in 2013.

Washington, D.C. Since 2010, retailers have levied a 5-cent tax on bags.

■ Statewide ban enacted

California California has led the way in plastic bag regulation. San Francisco was the first city in the state to ban plastic shopping bags, in 2007. Since then, local jurisdictions, including Los Angeles, have passed 84 ordinances. State legislators recently passed a statewide ban.

■ Major regulation being considered or pending

Georgia The Atlanta City Council is considering legislation.

Illinois Chicago passed a ban earlier this year that will take effect in 2015 for big retailers and in 2016 for smaller retailers.

Missouri The St. Louis Board of Alderman is considering bag legislation.

New York The New York

City Council is considering a 10-cent fee for single-use bags. Several communities in Westchester and Suffolk Counties have instituted plastic bag bans.

Pennsylvania Legislators are considering a statewide ban or tax.

Vermont The state legislature is considering a bag tax.

SOURCES: Californians Against Waste, Earth Policy Institute, Hillex Poly