



PSA-058-Sea of plastic bags- World's Oceans

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Reprinted 7/24/17

This 2008 photo shows debris in Hanauma Bay, Hawaii. A new study estimates nearly 270,000 tons of plastic is floating in the world's oceans. **uncredited** NOAA Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center file

EDITORIALS

DECEMBER 11, 2014 4:00 PM

A sea of plastic bags upon an ocean of trash

BY THE EDITORIAL BOARD



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A new academic study out this week, and [published in the journal PLOS ONE](#), for the first time gives a hard number to the amount of plastic garbage littering our oceans. It's a sobering figure: 5.25 trillion particles of plastic.

That's a number so large as to be incomprehensible. So, picture it this way: 269,000 tons of water bottles, Lego pieces, disposable pens and lighters, take-out coffee lids, Barbie heads, detergent containers and, of course, lots of plastic bags floating atop the sparkling blue horizon.

That's a helpful image for people to recall should they run across one of the petitions being circulated by the plastic bag industry trying to stop California's ban on single-use plastic bags.

A group of plastic bag makers, most of them outside of the state, are spending millions on misleading ads and paid signature gatherers to get a referendum on the bag ban on the November 2016 ballot.

If the referendum qualifies for the ballot, it will postpone the July 15 bag ban implementation date until after the 2016 election. We don't think the ban would be overturned by voters, who, according to polls, are mostly supportive. The plastic bag industry probably doesn't either, but qualifying a referendum will give them more than a year reprieve.

It's impossible to say how many more plastic shopping bags will be added to the Pacific Ocean during that time, but it's a fair bet that a good portion of the 14 billion plastic grocery bags used in the state each year will end up in storm drains that flow into the ocean.

Though the bags can be recycled in California, hardly any are. Some are used a second time, especially by dog owners, but most end up in landfills where they will sit for generations before breaking down. Many of those, however, will escape their confines, catching the wind in their unique parachute design until they end up strewn about the state's wild places – clogging up rivers flowing through the Valley, wrapping around Joshua trees in the desert and tying up manzanita bushes in the mountains.

There are ways for Californians to derail the plastic industry's fight to keep profiting from polluting our state. The first, anyone can do: Don't sign the petition.

The plastic bag industry is pulling every trick out of its, er, bag of them to win back waning public support of plastic bags: spurious claims that it's no more than a crooked deal between politicians and the grocers, who can charge a fee for paper bags; baseless job-loss claims; and even absurd warnings that using reusable bags will spread disease.

The second way is for elected leaders in cities that have held off on enacting local bans to do so now. [Mayor Kevin Johnson has started this process for Sacramento](#) in case the referendum qualifies. If the City Council passes a ban, it would join more than 130 other cities and counties in the state already covered by one.

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It also would send a strong message from the capital to the main supporter of the bag ban referendum, South Carolina-based Hilex Poly, that Californians are done being complicit in the trashing of our precious natural resources.

We don't expect a single-use plastic bag ban in California to stop the flow of plastic trash into the oceans altogether. Opponents of bag bans rightly point out that plastic bags are just one of the many sources of trash. But every difficult journey begins somewhere. Stopping the flow of one significant source of garbage is a great way to begin.

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