

California's plastic pollution fight may be headed to voters

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Photo: Michael Maloney / The Chronicle 2007

Plastics are separated from other recyclables on a conveyor belt in this 2007 file photo. An initiative proposed for California's November 2020 ballot would dramatically reduce the amount of disposable plastic that could be used in the state.

SACRAMENTO — California environmentalists battling to stop plastic from polluting the ocean and piling up in landfills say they can't wait for state lawmakers to act — they're hoping to take the fight to the ballot box.

Recology, the Bay Area waste hauler, and environmental groups filed a proposed initiative Monday that would require plastic manufacturers to dramatically reduce the amount of products that people use once and toss in the trash.

The initiative, aimed at the November 2020 ballot, is a more far-reaching version of two waste-reduction bills that died at the state Capitol this year, both were opposed by the plastics and petroleum industries.

Eric Potashner, vice president of Recology, said the consequences of inaction are mounting as plastic strangles marine habitats and overwhelms recycling facilities. He also signaled that qualifying the initiative for the ballot is intended in part to get state lawmakers to do something in 2020 that they could not this year — pass a major bill designed to cut plastic pollution.

“We’re running out of time,” Potashner said. “We need a backup plan if the Legislature is not able to do something significant on plastic-packaging pollution.”

Supporters must collect 623,212 signatures of registered California voters by the end of April to qualify the proposed initiative for the November ballot.

Tim Shestek, a lobbyist for the American Chemistry Council, which represents the plastics industry, said the “timing of this new proposal strikes us as odd,” given that lawmakers are working on a major packaging recycling bill that could pass in January.

“This new initiative proposal will only serve as a distraction, and resources that could be going toward recycling could now be unnecessarily wasted,” Shestek said in an email.

The measure would require manufacturers to make all plastic packaging and single-use foodware items, including cups, straws and utensils, recyclable or compostable by 2030. It would also:

- Create a fee of up to 1 cent for manufacturers on every plastic item or product with plastic packaging. The money would be used to build recycling and composting facilities, and to pay for restoration projects such as beach cleanups.
- Prohibit food vendors, including restaurants and grocery stores, from using Styrofoam and other plastic-foam takeout containers.
- Require manufacturers to reduce to the “maximum extent possible” the plastic packaging and single-use products they create. That could require them to offer more reusable containers.

Caryl Hart, a member of the California Coastal Commission who lives in Sebastopol, co-authored the initiative. She said the popularity of plastic, made from fossil fuels, has exacerbated climate change.

“We’re seeing activity in the Legislature, but there’s not success,” Hart said. “If California is not going to lead, who is going to?”

Potashner said the penny-or-less fee would build infrastructure like recycling plants and composting facilities so more California communities can dispose of waste locally instead of shipping it overseas.

“This initiative aims to hold the plastics industry accountable for the products they create,” Recology CEO Mike Sangiacomo said in a statement.

Recology, like many waste haulers, sends thousands of tons of plastic waste to landfills every year. The recycling industry has been upended recently, as overseas markets, including China and the Philippines, have begun rejecting U.S. plastics.

Recology has pledged to spend \$1 million to qualify the initiative for the ballot, but the effort could cost at least several million dollars more. Potashner said other groups plan to contribute to the fight, but none has made a public commitment.

Environmentalists anticipate opposition from the deep-pocketed plastics industry, which spent heavily to defeat bills in the Legislature this year. One company, Novolex, spent more than \$959,000.

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