

# Big Tobacco and e-cigarette companies should help clean up their mess

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Guest Commentary

**By Heidi Sanborn**, *Special to CALmatters*

California should have a good handle on smoking-related litter. After all, the state's residents smoke at the second-lowest rate in the U.S. after Utah.



There already are strong and dutifully-enforced litter laws with convictions that can carry hefty four-digit fines. But a walk down any California city sidewalk or a stroll on the beach easily demonstrates that smokers still are tossing their butts on the ground.

The truth is that California has struggled to cut cigarette butt litter for decades. But with the rise in popularity of small cigars with plastic filters and e-cigarettes, the waste problem is getting worse.

Many smokers who snub a cigarette in a parking lot don't realize that the filters are plastic and stay in the environment long after the paper wrapping, glue, and leftover tobacco have dissolved.

The filters are made from spongy acetate plastic fibers that don't decompose, and studies show they may actually be worse for your health than no filter at all.

Other than the visual blight, you might ask, is this a big deal?

Tossed cigarette butts and the plastic tips of small cigars slowly break down into microplastics. As they are washed away into storm drains, they leach toxic and cancer-causing chemicals into rivers and oceans and our food chain. Filters can hurt or kill birds, fish, and other wildlife that mistake them for food.

Smoking litter is not limited to conventional cigarettes and cigars.

Electronic cigarette devices called e-cigarettes, mods, or vape pens also create litter problems.

The devices contain tiny lithium ion batteries, which are classified as hazardous waste. As such, they are banned from household trash and require a special disposal process, a process that, unfortunately, e-cigarette smokers rarely follow because it is inconvenient.

The largest source of e-cigarette waste is the plastic cartridges and pods, which usually

aren't refillable and contain chemicals including metals and flavorings linked to cancer, as well as tobacco, nicotine and marijuana. These cartridges require hazardous waste disposal as well. But like the batteries, most end up in landfills and the environment.

Beyond all the environmental problems that tobacco and e-cigarette waste cause, these items cost taxpayers tens of millions of dollars per year.

Cigarette butts clog sewers and storm drains. They even blight those communities that are fortunate enough to have frequent litter pick-ups. The California Department of Transportation has estimated annual roadway litter clean-up costs at over \$52 million, with cigarette waste yearly ranked as the number one most littered item.

The solution to these problems is surprisingly simple.

Legislators should pass, and Gov. Gavin Newsom should sign [Senate Bill 424](#), by Santa Barbara Sen. Hannah-Beth Jackson sponsored by my organization, the [National Stewardship Action Council](#), and supported by several organizations including the [Cigarette Butt Pollution Project](#) the [Clean Seas Coalition](#).

The bill has a twofold strategy. It would:

- Ban sale of single use tobacco products such as filters and electronic devices and
- Allow the sale of reusable products as long as they are readily recyclable or have a producer take-back program to cover the cost of the safe collection, recycling, and disposal of the waste created by their profitable products.

This framework, known as Extended Producer Responsibility, has been successfully used to manage mercury thermostats, needles and pharmaceuticals.

This measure would not affect smokers' ability to purchase tobacco products or hurt smokers' health. It would, however, reduce local government and taxpayer expense, reduce toxic chemicals in waterways, and prevent the unnecessary endangering of our wildlife.

Unlike previous legislative efforts to address tobacco waste pollution, this bill has a shot at success: it has already been approved by two Senate committees.

The companies that make billions of dollars from filtered cigarettes and electronic cigarette devices should participate in the solution to the expensive, harmful problem that their products have created and left the taxpayers and the environment bearing the costs. California can make that happen by approving SB 424.

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