



## News of pending bag tax veto hailed at hearing on plastic waste

Brenda Flanagan, August 23, 2018

Some drama at a joint legislative environment committee hearing down the shore, and we don't mean the Teaneck teen dressed in 500 plastic bags. Sen. Bob Smith broke the news that Gov. Phil Murphy had decided to veto a bill that would've imposed a five-cent, statewide fee on single-use, carryout plastic and paper bags.

"This is huge news," said Doug O'Malley, director of Environment NJ. "Gov. Murphy is making the exact right move for the environment, because what we're hearing from towns all across New Jersey is that we need to move forward to choose wildlife over waste and to ultimately ban plastic bags."

"I think it's a win for the environment, that when you have a bill sitting on the governor's desk that actually would set us backwards in the fight to ban plastics in New Jersey and plastic bags, whenever a governor stops a bill like that I think it's a win for the environment," said Jeff Tittel, director of the NJ Sierra Club.

Environmentalists told the committee, which took testimony Thursday on how plastic and Styrofoam is polluting NJ's environment, that a ban's far more effective because folks just get accustomed to paying a nickel or dime per bag.

While the bill's sat on the governor's desk, more than 15 towns across the state adopted local bans, afraid of getting preempted by a state law.

"This is the evidence that these towns are trying to get in, they're trying to beat the clock before the governor takes action one way or the other," said John Weber, Mid-Atlantic Regional Manager of the Surfrider Foundation. "I think people in NJ would prefer a ban to a fee."

Plastic garbage stuffs landfills, clogs storm drains, litters beaches, and collects in vast gyres across oceans — killing wildlife, and that’s only the plastic you can see. Microplastic is apparently everywhere.

“Clean Ocean Action also did a study from Sandy Hook to Cape May, all of our beach sweep locations, the ocean’s water and a beach sample — and every single one of them has microplastics,” said Clean Ocean Action Executive Director Cindy Zipf.

During the hearing, a Rutgers researcher rattled the panel. Elizabeth Ravit, an assistant research professor in Rutgers’ environmental sciences department, reported even samples from the Passaic and Raritan Rivers found microplastics:

“84 percent were fragments, they were pieces of bigger plastic,” Ravit said. “Where we saw the highest densities of microplastics were at the two farthest upstream locations: Livingston and Bridgewater, which we did not expect to see.”

Plastics, chemistry and retail lobby representatives argued against banning plastic bags.

“If we were disposing and recycling and we had been doing this all along, we would all be enjoying this day at the beach,” said Sal Risalvato, the executive director of NJ’s Gasoline, Convenience Store and Automotive Association.

The governor’s veto expected next week clears the way for Smith’s bill, which is endorsed by environmentalists and would ban single use plastic bags and straws. He’s open to suggestions.

“That there should be a disabilities exemption, because there may be some people with disabilities who need a straw,” Smith said. “There was also a suggestion we make sure we go for Styrofoam cups because they create as many problems.”

Smith will hold hearings on his bill to ban plastic bags when the Legislature reconvenes in September.