



With veto coming of plastic-bag fee bill, will ban take its place?

Michelle Brunetti, August 23, 2018

TOMS RIVER — Legislators are faced with public pressure to either ban single-use plastic bags or find another way of combating plastics pollution, after it was revealed Thursday that Gov. Phil Murphy will veto a bill to charge 5 cents for each single-use plastic or paper bag.

Advocates argued forcibly for a ban at a joint meeting Thursday of the state Senate Environment and Energy Committee and the Assembly Environment and Solid Waste Committee.

The meeting was called to take testimony from scientists, environmentalists, industry representatives and others about how to keep plastics out of the state's waterways, where they break into microplastics, are eaten by marine life and ultimately enter the human food chain.

“Ban plastic and put a fee on paper. It’s a hybrid law of the land in California, and it’s working well,” recommended John Weber of the Surfrider Foundation, a nonprofit working for clean oceans.

Some in the plastics industry and representing convenience stores, however, want the bags to remain in use but get recycled. The bags are not now part of most recycling programs.

The problem isn’t the bags, which are light and strong and allow people to carry items easily, said Sal Risalvato, of the New Jersey Gas and Convenience Store Automotive Association.

“The solution is for people to properly dispose of them ... proper recycling,” said Risalvato.

Many towns, including Avalon, Stone Harbor, Brigantine, Stafford Township, Harvey Cedars and Long Beach Township have already moved to ban single-use plastics in their municipalities.

Some rushed to pass their own ordinances in case Murphy signed the bag-fee bill that passed the Legislature in June. The measure would have allowed merchants to keep 1 cent and sent 4 cents of every fee to the state, and precluded towns and counties from enacting their own bans or fees.

When state Senate Environment and Energy Committee Chairman Bob Smith, D-Middlesex, announced at the meeting that the governor will soon veto the bag fee bill, the room erupted in applause.

The Governor's Office declined to comment on Smith's announcement of the imminent veto, but other legislators and people close to the governor said the absolute veto is coming, perhaps Monday.

In the United States, only about 12 percent of plastics are recycled, said Serpil Guran, a research scientist who directs the Rutgers University EcoComplex in Bordentown, Burlington County. About 58 percent ends up in landfills. Much of the remainder ends up as litter along roads and finds its way into waterways, where it enters the food chain or is consumed by humans in drinking water.

Rutgers Professor Beth Ravit said she has worked with students sampling the Raritan and Passaic rivers in North Jersey, and they have found even higher concentrations of microplastics upstream in Livingston and Bridgewater than they found closer to the ocean.

"Now we are finding them much closer to where we humans are living, potentially in our fresh drinking water sources," said Ravit. "And we found over 300 organic compounds attached to these pieces of plastics. My conclusion is, it is critical to change the disposable piece."

A group of Teaneck Girl Scouts who successfully lobbied to have their Bergen County town enact a bag fee bill years ago also argued for a complete ban on single-use plastics.

But others, including a Princeton University chemistry professor, cautioned members not to think a ban will solve the plastic waste problem.

“The environmental challenge of plastics is evident, and ranks up there with CO₂ as a major challenge facing us,” said Paul Chirik, the Edwards S. Sanford Professor of Chemistry at Princeton.

He said plastic bags, packaging and other single-use plastics are made as a byproduct of fossil fuel production, including petroleum and natural gas.

“This is waste from the hydrocarbon industry,” said Chirik of the ethane and propane left after methane is taken for burning. What can’t be sold is turned to ethylene and propylene, the building blocks of plastics. “One reason we are seeing more use of plastics is the growth of the natural gas industry.”

But if we don’t use it for making plastics, he said, “it would be burned unproductively on site, and that would release carbon dioxide.”

Assembly committee Chairwoman Nancy Pinkin, D-Middlesex, asked whether that’s a reason to move away from using fossil fuels more quickly.

But Chirik said the technology isn’t there yet to do so.

“Right now you absolutely rely on these hydrocarbons for every minute of your life,” said Chirik. “In infinite time that’s where you want to be, but now it’s so far away technologically, it’s impractical.”

Chirik said expanding recycling to all types of plastics, including bags and packaging, may have to be part of the answer.

Even though most recycling programs can’t accept plastic bags, there are specialized programs for returning them to grocery stores and other places for recycling into composite decking and other

products, said Rocco D'Antonio of Organic Diversion, a food waste recycler in Marlton, Burlington County.