

# Can California Turn The Tide Against Single-Use Plastic?

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Sustainability

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LOS ANGELES, CA - JUNE 7: In this handout provided by Spectral Q, more than 5,000 Los Angeles kids, ... [+] Getty Images

A landmark piece of legislation is set to go before politicians in California, designed to curb the use of single-use plastic and packaging – but can it succeed?

The updated text of the Plastic Pollution Producer Responsibility Act – or SB54 – was published last week after three years of negotiations between politicians, environmental groups and manufacturers.

“The imminence of a statewide ballot measure sparked a historic negotiation between the major environmental and business communities, who agreed on a producer-responsibility approach with crucial accountability guardrails,” says state senator Ben Allen, the author of SB54.

“This legislative solution has all the specificity and predictability that both sides want, thus avoiding litigation and regulatory delays that a hastily drafted ballot measure may bring.”

Heidi Sanborn, an executive director at the National Stewardship Council and the chair of the California Commission on Recycling Markets and Curbside Recycling, says one of the key achievements is that the legislation calls for a 25% reduction in plastic packaging and foodware by both weight and unit by 2032.

“The total number of packages being produced has to reduce by 25% and the total weight of what’s left has to drop by 25%,” she explains. “This is a really big deal.”

She adds that 10% of the 25% source reduction would be achieved by eliminating single use plastics, without replacing them with another material.

And another 4% of that reduction of single use plastics must be eliminated by using reuse and refill systems.

“This would be the first time in the country's history that the plastic/foodware industry has agreed to reuse and refill targets.”

The legislation also requires that all single-use packaging and foodware, including non-plastic items, be recyclable and compostable within the state of California by 2032.

It also mandates a 65% recycling rate target and empowers California’s Department of Resources Recycling and Recovery (CalRecycle) with greater authority to increase source reduction mandate, post-2032.

There has been some criticism that the legislation does not go far enough on polystyrene, but Sanborn says it requires a 20% recycling performance standard for expanded polystyrene by 2025, which effectively amounts to a “de-facto ban”.

Perhaps the most important part of the legislation will also require the plastic packaging producers pay \$500 million a year over 10 years to fund environmental mitigation programs, and 60% of the money raised will be used to address affecting disadvantaged, low-income and rural communities. That is a total of \$5 billion to clean up the damage to California from plastic pollution.

“This for me, really sets us on the path of a true circular economy,” she tells Forbes. “We are checking all three boxes of a circular economy as defined by the Ellen McArthur Foundation – reduce waste and pollution, keep materials in motion (recycle and compost), and

regenerate natural systems.”

SB54 comes just weeks after the U.S. Interior Department announced it will phase out the sale of single-use plastic products in national parks and other public lands by 2032.

Scientists at Ocean Conservancy have claimed SB54 would directly eliminate nearly 23 million tons of single-use plastic packaging and foodware over the next 10 years, which amounts to nearly 26 times the weight of the Golden Gate Bridge.

“Without a doubt this bill, if passed, would be the strongest plastics legislation we have ever seen here in the United States,” says Dr. Anja Brandon, U.S. plastics policy analyst at Ocean Conservancy and a principal contributor to the bill text.

It also comes just weeks ahead of a deadline to withdraw a ballot measure, California Plastic Waste Reduction Regulations Initiative, also addressing plastic pollution and reduction.

“Our priority is fewer plastics on shelves and less plastic in our ocean, and both the ballot measure and SB54 can get us there,” says Jeff Watters, vice president of external affairs at Ocean Conservancy.

“If the legislature fails to act on this landmark opportunity with SB54, we will do everything we can to pass the ballot measure. This is the year California will lead on this issue.”