

Grocery bags not welcome in many Alaska villages

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By JOEL GAY

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ANCHORAGE (AP) Outside the Western Alaska village of Emmonak, white plastic shopping bags used to start appearing 15 miles from town. They blew out of the dump and rolled across the tundra like tumbleweeds. In Galena, they snagged in the trees and drifted into the Yukon River. Outside Kotlik, on the Yukon Delta, bags were found tangled around salmon and seals.

No more. The villages are among at least 30 communities statewide that have banned plastic bags.

It's working out good here," said Peter Captain Sr., chief of the tribal council in Galena, where the city banned stores from using plastic bags in 1998. You used to find plastic bags all over the place, up in the trees. But you don't see that now."

Other places around the world also have decided the bags' nuisance outweighs their convenience. Ireland and Taiwan started taxing bags to curtail their use. South Africa banned them completely, as did Bangladesh after devastating floods were attributed to stray plastic bags blocking drains.

In Alaska, other communities are now considering prohibitions, including the largest city off the road system, Bethel.

They're horrible. They're all over," said Bethel City Councilman Jerry Drake. Once, he said, driving to the airport outside town, in a one-mile stretch I counted over 200 bags."

Drake's proposal would ban Bethel stores but not restaurants from using plastic bags, essentially requiring them to use paper. Elsewhere, shoppers have been encouraged to provide their own canvas or nylon bags, though in some paper-only villages, shoppers hoard plastic bags and reuse them. Violating the Bethel ban could cost up to \$500.

The Bethel council largely supports the proposed ban, members said. Public hearings later this month will gauge local opinion, but Drake and other people believe the council will put the decision before Bethel voters in October.

In my four years on the council, I've never heard people talk to me like this" about any other community issue, Drake said.

The council approved a ban two years ago only to see a voter initiative repeal the measure months later.

The only reason it got repealed was that it was a poorly written ballot measure, where yes meant no and no meant yes," Drake said. I had to read the ballot about three times before I realized what was going on with it, and I knew all about it."

Others say that banning plastic bags is the wrong way to solve Bethel's trash problem. Restaurant owner Yolanda Jorgensen sponsored the repeal initiative two years ago and said she'll work to defeat the ban again this fall. There are many angles to attack, she said.

Jorgensen doesn't dispute they're ugly but added, There are a lot more things littering our tundra than plastic bags."

Banning plastic wasn't easy in Emmonak or Galena, officials said, and attempts in other villages have failed because plastic bags have loyal fans.

Ban supporters, however, can point to places like Galena. The Yukon River village feared losing its plastic bags, but according to store owner Max Huhndorf, it's worked out OK. It took a little bit of adjustment, but we did it."

In Emmonak, the village corporation store pays a nickel for each paper bag returned, said Albert Westlock of the tribal council.

If the bag bans spread, there may soon be a bounty for plastic bags. Bill Stokes, the rural environmental specialist for the Department of Environmental Conservation, promotes recycling plastic bags into valuable crafts using nothing more than a size 6 crochet hook.

He first saw the method practiced in Mekoryuk in 1993, but it has spread statewide. People cut plastic bags into strips, then crochet them into backpacks, handbags, sweat bath mats and baskets.

Nevertheless, Stokes encourages bag bans.

Village by village by village, they're just really tired of them," he said.

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