

Grocery bags not welcome in many Alaska villages

Posted: Sunday, May 04, 2003

By JOEL GAY

Anchorage Daily News

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The only reason it got repealed was that it was a poorly written ballot measure, where yes meant no and no meant yes," Drake said.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, they're just really tired of them," he said.

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Cordova will ban plastic bags and foam containers starting Oct. 1

Author: Suzanna Caldwell Updated: September 11, 2016 Published September 11, 2016



The Eyak Preservation Council has provided reusable shopping bags to Cordova residents since the city council voted unanimously to ban plastic bags and polystyrene foam food containers. (Eyak Preservation Council)

Starting Oct. 1, plastic bags will be banned in the Prince William Sound town of Cordova.

The ban has been a year in the making, since the Cordova City Council voted unanimously in November 2015 to ban plastic bags and polystyrene foam food containers in the community of 2,200 residents.

Bethel and Hooper Bay are two other Alaska communities with plastic bag bans. Others, including Homer, have attempted similar bans in recent years. Homer's ban, first approved by the City Council, lasted only several months before being overturned by a popular vote in 2013. A Fairbanks tax on plastic bags was considered by the City Council in 2009, but community pushback forced the city to rescind the measure before it ever went into effect.

Cordova's one-year lag was to give businesses — there are two main grocery stores in the town — time to adapt to the change, according to Emily Stolarcyk, program manager for the Eyak Preservation Council, the organization that spearheaded the bag ban.

Enforcement will be through the police department, with violators facing a fine of up to \$1,000. But interim city manager and Police Chief Mike Hicks said it's unlikely the maximum fine would be imposed. He said most retailers have been receptive to the change.

"I don't think we're going to have any problems with people switching over," he said. "I think it's going to go just fine."

The council brought the idea to the city last year, but it wasn't exactly new. The Cordova High School club Future Problem Solvers suggested the idea to the city years earlier, though it never gained traction.

Stolarcyk decided to change that, gathering 300 signatures last summer before bringing the ordinance to the council.

She said Cordova, a fishing hub near the mouth of the Copper River, is dependent on healthy oceans. She said a plastic bag ban would help reinforce that message in the community.

It would also help clean things up. Stolarcyk said Cordova has some informal recycling but no regular program. She said it's not unusual to see plastic grocery sacks stuck in trees or bushes along the highway leading out to the landfill, 17 miles from the city center.

Former mayor Jim Kacsh, who approved the ordinance, said he often goes hunting for rabbits along the road. Bags and plastic foam clamshell boxes dot the landscape.

"You wind up sneaking up on a little plastic bag because they look just like the bunny," he said in a phone interview Wednesday. "They're everywhere."

He said there was some pushback from retailers during the debate, but it was minimal. Kacsh said he supports the ban, but he admits he's struggled with what to do at his own NAPA Auto Parts store. He's been saving boxes and looking into buying reusable cloth bags for customers. But those are expensive, and customers would have to pay for them.

James Brand, branch manager of the AC Value Center in Cordova, the city's largest retailer, said the store is still working through its stock of regular plastic bags. Last year the store handed out 140,000 plastic bags.

He said biodegradable bags are in the process of being shipped and will likely be there in time for the ban's implementation Oct. 1. But he said if they aren't the store will still have paper bags.

Brand said there was precedent for using biodegradable bags, since the Bethel AC store also uses them. He said the biggest challenge has been trying to get Cordova's sizable transient population to understand the upcoming ban. This summer the store handed out 400 reusable bags hoping to target those customers. They were a hit.

"We have a lot of people come through with the cloth bags," Branch said. "It's really cool to see people embracing it."

About this Author

Suzanna Caldwell

Suzanna Caldwell is a former reporter for Alaska Dispatch News.

The problem with plastics

Litter a threat to Mat-Su moose, reindeer

By CHRIS FORD Frontiersman.com Aug 5, 2017



Research biologist Bill Collins shows Liz Jackson of Hatcher Pass Bed and Breakfast one of the moose from the small herd he keeps at the Palmer Experiment Farm. The mammals have fistulas on their sides allowing researchers and scientists direct access to their rumen where the first stage of food digestion takes place.

Courtesy photo

WASILLA — According to the Wall Street Journal, 100 billion plastic shopping bags are distributed throughout the United States each year, costing retailers an estimated \$4 billion annually. Included in that tally is 90 percent of all grocery bags and only 1 to 3 percent of the total is recycled.

A portion ends up in landfills, while others are spotted floating in lakes and rivers, stuck to trees or blowing across the landscape. Some of those are consumed by a multitude of wildlife and domesticated animals. Here in the Mat-Su, plastic bag consumption has led to the death of reindeer and caribou.

Plastic bags are made of polyethylene, a petroleum product. According to the national watchdog group EcoWatch, it takes approximately 1,000 years for polyethylene to break down. They do not biodegrade but instead photodegrade—breaking down into smaller and smaller bits. It's at this point where most reported cases of the product entering the food stream take place.

It is estimated approximately one billion seabirds and mammals die each year as a result of plastic bag ingestion. Death can also be painful. For larger animals such as mammals that ingest the entire bag or large piece of plastic, the product can wrap around their intestines or they choke and suffocate.

Dr. Bill Collins, a research biologist at the University of Alaska Matanuska Experiment Farm in Palmer, is heading up a program for Alaska Department of Fish and Game. He maintains a small herd of moose at the Palmer facility to study feeding habitats and nutritional values of the animal. As part of the research, the moose have fistulas located outside their rumen. The fistula is basically a hole with a rubber stopper that allows for direct access into the rumen.

The rumen is the first stomach of a ruminant, or mammal, which receives food or cud, and nutrients from esophagus. There the food is partially digested with the aid of bacteria and enzymes. The animal then regurgitates the food, or cud, and then chews it further allowing it to enter the digestive tract.

In a video supplied by the Mat-Su Zero Waste Coalition, Collins pours the contents of a moose's rumen onto the ground. It is littered with plastic shopping bags and Zip-Lock style plastic bags. Collins said he periodically finds the plastic in the samples.

Collins said given the Farm's location, it is subject to strong winds. That makes it easy for plastic-based litter to frequently find its way onto the open pastures and surrounding land.

"It blows into the pens," Collins said. "It has happened elsewhere."

Collins said he spent 20 years in a similar position in Kenai where he observed the problem appearing in livestock. He's been in the Mat-Su for the past 35 years and started his current program gathering nutritional data on moose 12 years ago. Although he hasn't lost an animal, at least not a direct cause and effect, he is not ruling out that digestion of plastics hasn't impacted any of the animals in his study.

"If a portion of their rumen is filled partially with plastic, it limits the rumen's capacity and reduces digestion which can reduce nutrition. That can range from light to severe to death."

Collins said he constantly scours the landscape for stray plastics, adding there is no shortage. Collins added he hasn't seen an increase in the amount that makes its way onto the farm.

"Every time the wind blows, it's always there. If you're downwind from anything, it's prevalent," Collins said.

Carol Montgomery, chair of the Coalition's Plastic Bag Committee, said Williams Reindeer Farm has lost many animals over the years from plastic bag ingestion. She said the farm has necropsy reports to verify the cause. Agate Inn owners Harvey and Sandy Bowers, who have reindeer, or domesticated caribou, also confirm the plastic bag issue.

Harvey Bowers said vigilant scouring of their property results in approximately one pickup truck bed load of collected plastics each year. He said since the bags don't decompose, his animals are often digging up 30-year-old plastic bags while grazing. He made the age determination based on imprinted logos on the recovered bags.

"It's a long-term thing so we have to be constantly vigilant," Bowers said. "We've done necropsies on some of the reindeer. It's a miserable death...our age will be known as the age of plastic."

He said most of the collected trash through his property is blown-in plastic.

Montgomery said regarding wildlife, the only way to determine cause of death is through necropsy, which is expensive and not often done.

"We were able to confirm the death of a musk ox calf in Nome from plastic bag asphyxiation through Kimberlee Beckmen, M.S., D.V.M., PhD, a wildlife veterinarian at ADFG in Fairbanks," Montgomery said. "She also confirmed a sea turtle death from plastic obstruction in the Gulf of Alaska."

"So, while there are few necropsies done on wild animals, we are able to confirm deaths in domesticated animals, and efforts to prevent further casualties by patrolling their environment. This raises concerns about the mortality from plastic ingestion in the wild where animals are not protected in these ways. We know that moose eat plastic, but so far I have not heard of any necropsies done on them, so we don't know if it is killing them as often as it kills the caribou and reindeer. With all the pressure on subsistence and game resources it seems a shame to lose wildlife to such a preventable human cause," Montgomery concluded.

Contact reporter Chris Ford at 352-2270 or chris.ford@frontiersman.com

Borough Assembly member introduces plastic bag ordinances

By CHRIS FORD Frontiersman.com Aug 5, 2017



Some Mat-Su residents may have seen this picture before. It was taken behind Valley Community for Recycling Solutions. Mollie Boyer, who oversees operations, is standing next to a forest of plastic debris that, despite efforts to curtail it, blows in from the adjacent Central Landfill. The landfill has since made a concerted effort to clean up the debris, Boyer said.

Courtesy photo

PALMER — A loosely-knit group organized last fall had a goal of drawing attention to and educating Valley residents on the hazards of single-use plastic bags. Now they have the attention of the Mat-Su Borough Assembly.

At the body's Tuesday meeting, Assemblywoman Barbara Doty introduced Ordinance 17-099—"An ordinance...to establish a program designed to reduce the use of plastic bags by imposing an excise tax for plastic carryout bags on large retailers."

The ordinance would charge a 10-cent plastic shopping bag excise tax to retailers with annual sales of more than \$1 million. The legislation has multiple intentions. One is to reduce the volume of trash that ends up at the borough's Central Landfill. Another reason, Doty cited, is to reduce the amount of litter, as the bags are easily and often blown around Valley roads and fields often ending up stuck in trees, scrub and tall grasses. Several Mat-Su organizations and individuals have lost reindeer and caribou because the animals ingest the bags while foraging (see separate story).

As the ordinance stands now, the proposed excise tax is aimed at the Valley's largest retailers. As written, the tax would not be a direct charge to the end-user—consumers. An accompanying memorandum with the ordinance stated that because the tax is an excise tax, no sale or transfer of goods or services need occur for the tax to apply. The tax would apply anytime a retailer, as defined in the ordinance, provides a plastic bag to another regardless if there is a sale involved. Retailers filing timely tax returns would be permitted to retain 20 percent of the collected tax, the memo stated.

The memorandum stated that estimated costs of collecting the tax comes in at approximately \$60,000 which would pay for a half-time borough position. The tax would be collected at the wholesale level and collected quarterly. According to the document, at 21 million bags annually, the tax would bring in approximately \$2.1 million in revenue annually. That amount is anticipated to drop with the expected drop in plastic bag use by consumers. The memorandum states the generated revenues are intended to help fund recycling programs and promote recycling education in the Mat-Su.

In submitting the ordinance, Doty included examples from US cities where such a tax was approved. One of those included the 7-cent per bag tax approved in Chicago on Feb. 1, 2017. That tax included both plastic and paper bags. According to a recent study conducted by New York University and the University of Chicago's Energy and Environmental Lab, the number of included bags used by customers fell 42 percent in the first month following implementation.

According to Patti Fisher, a member of the Mat-Su Zero Waste Coalition's Plastic Bag Committee, the group is committed to working with retailers to encourage this tax be passed on to customers in the form of a bag fee. Fisher stated that method exists in many cities across the country.

"How many times have you been handed a bag with two items in it," the committee posted on its Facebook social media page. "We are just programmed to take the bag without thinking. Maybe this will make people think twice about the garbage they are creating."

Comments on the group's Facebook page have been mixed, but mostly against such a plan.

Included among them is having big-box and grocery stores that fall under the ordinance offer a customer refund for those bringing their own bags while shopping. Others cry the tax is an example of "the nanny state rearing its ugly head".

An Aug. 1 post stated the committee "...worked very hard drafting an ordinance but in the end the lawyers make the final draft. Let's just say it is not perfect and we are going to try to add a couple of amendments to it on Aug. 15 after it is read."

No municipalities in Alaska implement a tax but several have banned them. Included are Cordova, Bethel and Hooper Bay.

The assembly is expected to hold the first public hearing on the proposed ordinance at its Aug. 15 regular meeting.

Contact reporter Chris Ford at 352-2270 or chris.ford@frontiersman.com

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Wasilla City Council approves plastic bag ban starting July 1

TOPICS: Plastic Bags Wasilla City Council



(Photo by eflon/Flickr Creative Commons)

POSTED BY: MATT BUXTON JANUARY 10, 2018

The city council of Wasilla has voted to ban single-use plastic bags in a move to combat litter.

The council voted on Monday night to approve the ordinance that was put forward by Wasilla Mayor Bert Cottle, [according to Alaska Public Media](#).

Unlike the pre-filed House Bill 264 by Rep. Andy Josephson, D-Anchorage, that [seeks to impose a 20-cent tax on single-use plastic bags](#), the Wasilla City



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Council's actions are an outright ban on plastic bags. It imposes a warning and fine system for businesses that ignore the ban, escalating to \$300 for the third and later offense.

The bill allows businesses to continue handing out paper bags or reusable bags for a free or an additional fee.

The reasoning is a little less bleeding-heart environmentalism than it is an attempt at dealing with rampant litter created by discarded plastic bags caught in the Mat-Su area's strong winds, Carol Montgomery, the unofficial chairwoman of the Mat-Su Zero Waste Commission's Plastic Bag Committee, told Alaska Public Media.

"Those bags, you see them skittering across the street everywhere. There's no way to safely contain plastic bags here in the Valley. There's no way to really dispose of them without them flying away," Montgomery told the radio station. "This is a minimal amount of government regulation to solve a really big problem."

Alaska Public Media also reported that the Plastic Bag Committee plans on handing out free reusable bags and would support a similar ban in the city of Palmer. Similar bans have already been instituted Bethel, Cordova and Hooper Bay.

The lone opposition came from Wasilla Councilman Tim Burney, who told Alaska Public Media, "If I want to shop at a store that has plastic bags, I should have the right to do so."

Full explanation

Bag Requirements – New City of Wasilla bag requirements, effective July 1, 2018

What the requirements mean

- Prohibits all establishments in City limits from providing single-use plastic disposable shopping

midnightsunak.com
The finalists are Leanna Mack of Utqiagvik, Sandy Shroyer-Beaver of Kotzebue and Eugene Smith of Kotzebue.

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bags for the purpose of carrying away goods from the point of sale.

- Allows establishments to provide customers with any size recyclable paper or reusable carryout bags.
- Allows establishments to provide carryout bags made of plastic 2.25 mil or thicker, with or without charge at their discretion.
- Imposes a warning to the establishment for the first offense, second offense \$100, and third offense \$300.
- Promotes reusable carryout bags as the best alternative to single-use plastic bags.

Exemptions

- Bags used in stores for bulk items or to protect vegetables, meat, frozen foods, and similar items are exempt.
- Bags sold in packages containing multiple bags intended for use as garbage bags or to contain pet waste, or yard waste bags are exempt.

Additional information

- **Read Ordinance Serial No. 17-24 (AM)**

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Wilson said it felt like she was being held responsible for the incidents.

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Wilson said it wasn't the first time former legislator Bill Stoltze went after her.

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FEATURED

Reusable totes gain popularity in Fairbanks

Julie Herrmann/For the News-Miner Feb 15, 2014



◀ ▶

A rack of reusable grocery bags on display at Fred Meyer West on Airport Way Wednesday morning, February 5, 2014. The store recently stopped giving customers a 5-cent refund per bag for using reusable bags.

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Eric Engman/News-Miner

FAIRBANKS — Reusable bags are multiplying across Fairbanks. The soft floppy totes are sold at stores around Fairbanks and are often given out by businesses as well.

Big box retailers have long offered the totes for sale at checkout, touting them as a “green” alternative to plastic and paper. Fred Meyer, Walmart and Safeway all offer reusable bags for sale at or near the checkout line. Local printers also have noticed a sharp increase in the number of businesses wanting their logo and name printed on reusable bags.

“We’ve had quite a few orders lately for different reusable totes,” said Interior Graphics and Printing owner Michelle Maynor. “We actually have some that we use for our customers.”

Trademark, a Fairbanks printing and engraving company, sends its smaller orders out the door in reusable bags and has seen orders for printed bags explode.

“Maybe two years ago, we would get an order or two a year,” said Ron Macom, the owner of Trademark. “Lately, we’ve had probably three or four orders in the past two months. Throughout 2013, probably two or three dozen.”

For several years, Fred Meyer offered customers a 5 cent refund per reusable bag they used at checkout to encourage customers to not only buy reusable bags, but to keep bringing them back and reusing them. A few months ago, Fred Meyer stopped offering the refund, informing customers that the program was a success since customers are using more reusable bags.

“The consumer has changed their behavior and bring their own bags,” said Melinda Merrill, a Fred Meyer spokeswoman. “They don’t do it for 5 cents. They do it because they realized it’s better, and they will continue to use them.”

Safeway shopper Gene Baalam carried a Fred Meyer reusable bag when he shopped last Friday. “I never really liked those plastic bags,” Baalam said, “I think about once they get thrown in the garbage, what happens then?”

Fred Meyer shopper Bonita Post usually brings reusable bags to the store. "I've gotten into the habit, and I use them all the time," Post said. "I even make my own."

Some customers still like the standard plastic grocery bag. Frequent Fred Meyer shopper Nanci Jones uses reusable bags at Sam's Club, which sells reusable bags and doesn't offer bags at checkout, but likes getting plastic ones at Fred Meyer. She reuses them as trash bags, packing material and more.

"They're good for traveling," Jones said. "They make a great shower cap when I forget mine."

Proponents of reusable bags say the bags are environmentally friendly by keeping thousands of plastic bags out of landfills and can carry more items than plastic. Proponents of plastic say plastic bags are usually reused around the house and that reusable bags can spread disease from leaking liquids if not cleaned frequently.

Some cities, like Portland, Ore., have banned plastic grocery bags altogether. Other cities levy a tax of a few cents on every plastic bag a customer uses.

The Fairbanks North Star Borough considered such a tax back in 2009. The ordinance required that all large retailers in the borough tax customers 5 cents per plastic bag used. The profits would go toward a borough recycling program. Many members of the public called the tax premature, and it was rescinded Oct. 8, 2009, a month after it was adopted, without ever going into effect.

Several options available for recycling plastic bags

Customers who use plastic bags have several options for recycling them. Fred Meyer, Safeway and Walmart all have bins for plastic bags in their stores, but don't accept any other recyclables. The recycled bags are collected and hauled out of Fairbanks for recycling.

Most recycled plastic bags are turned into composite lumber, a durable wood product made of plastic and sawdust. Plastic bags also can be reused the same way as reusable bags by taking them back to the store and reusing them for groceries.

Another common way of recycling plastic grocery bags is reusing them around the home. Lining trash bins, picking up after pets, lining kitty-litter buckets, storing items to keep them dust-free, carrying lunch or wet laundry, protecting surfaces during painting projects and tying them over plants to protect them from a freeze are all common ways to reuse plastic bags.

One unique way to up-cycle a plastic bag is to use it as a crafting medium. The bags can be cut into strips and then knit, crocheted or woven into a reusable bag or tote.

Kodiak City Council bans disposable plastic shopping bags

By [The Associated Press](#) - January 30, 2018



Kodiak city council just introduced a plastic bag ban.



KODIAK — The Kodiak City Council approved a ban on some plastic bags.

The new law goes into effect on April 22, the Kodiak Daily Mirror reported Monday.

Store owners, some of which have mixed feelings on the ban, will be able to keep giving customers bags from their current inventories for eight months.

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Councilmember Charles Davidson said only “disposable plastic shopping” bags will be banned, meaning it’s possible store owners could give out other types of plastic bags.

Other plastics still allowed include those used to “contain dampness or leaks from items such as frozen foods, meat or fish, flowers or potted plants” and “bags sold for buyer’s use off the seller’s premises for such purposes as the collection and disposal of garbage, pet waste, or yard waste.”

David Zimmerman, manager of Sutliff’s hardware store, said he voiced some concerns to the council but that his store would adjust to the changes.

“It is probably going to cost us a bit more to switch to paper bags, but it’s manageable,” Zimmerman said. “Hopefully people will remember to bring bags with them when they’re shopping. It’ll take some adjustment, but we’ll figure it out.”

Kelly Krueger, speaking on behalf of herself and Sun’aq Tribe of Kodiak, said that the tribe has submitted a grant application to National Geographic to fund efforts to reduce marine plastic pollution.

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If given money via the grant, some would go toward purchasing 2,000 reusable bags for public use in Kodiak.