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Mixed bag on plastics

State lawmakers stall on landmark legislation on plastic waste

BY **RACHEL BECKER** / CalMatters

An ambitious push to make California the first state to stem the flow of plastic trash by phasing out single-use packaging and foodware failed Sept. 14 amid dogged industry opposition, as state lawmakers adjourned without acting on two far-reaching recycling bills.

However, a third measure calling for more recycled plastic in beverage bottles did manage to get to a vote and pass-one for three in a complex but urgent fight to address California's recycling woes.

The mixed result represented one step forward, two steps back for the lawmakers who aimed to tackle California's waste crisis as fragments of plastic drift through the depths of Monterey Bay and recycling centers close across the state.

The Legislature sent Gov. Gavin Newsom a bill requiring manufacturers to increase the amount of recycled plastic in beverage bottles to 50% over the next 10 years. But they never voted on two other bills that called for a 75% reduction in waste from disposable packaging and foodware such as forks, stirrers and cups. The Legislature could revive the bills in January ----but for now, the state will have to wait.

Julia Stein, supervising attorney at UCLA's Frank G. Wells Environmental Law Clinic, called it "a missed opportunity for California to take a leadership role in regulating plastic producers."

Kathryn Phillips, director of Sierra Club California, saw less of a setback. "It's always disappointing when things don't go the ideal way," she said. "But I actually think this is not a defeat, it's just a delay."

The decisions came as California's recyclers are struggling to cope with markets in turmoil after China's 2017 announcement that it would tighten contamination standards and ban imports of certain types of waste. California once exported about a third of its recycling, much of it to China, according to estimates from CalRecycle.



Now, California's recyclers are stockpiling or landfilling bales of plastic films, clamshell-style containers and even paper that they struggle to sell. rePlanet, a major collector of beverage containers, shuttered its 284 centers in California despite receiving \$25 million from the state.

"We really have a crisis on our hands here," said Sen. Ben Allen, the Santa Monica Democrat who, with Democratic Assemblywoman Lorena Gonzalez of San Diego, authored the two bills that didn't receive a vote as the legislative year ended.

Their two bills, collectively called the California Circular Economy and Pollution Reduction Act, would have set a statewide goal of cutting three quarters of the waste from disposable packaging and products like straws and stirrers by Jan. 1, 2030. That would also have been the deadline for manufacturers to start making such goods out of completely recyclable or compostable materials.

The act faced early opposition by the plastics and beverage industries who argued the bills were too punitive and that California should fix its recycling infrastructure before taking aim at manufacturers. Objections from many plastics and beverage businesses ultimately fell away, however.

Still, the measures also picked up opposition. The Glass Packaging Institute, for instance, objected to having 100% recyclable glass lumped in with the rest of the packaging the legislation covered.

Allen said negotiations will continue. "We make a few changes and we make it happen in the new year."

CalMatters is a nonprofit, nonpartisan media venture explaining California policies and politics. An unabridged version of this story is available at newsreview.com/sacramento.