

Opinion: Banning plastic bags will kill California jobs, won't help the environment

By Kevin Kelly

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The state Senate is considering a bill banning plastic carryout bags. This legislation would tax consumers, forcing them to buy paper or reusable bags, and create an expensive new bureaucracy at a time of record deficits. The bill is consuming the time of our state government, while it still hasn't passed a budget.

But let's focus on a more specific, immediate impact of the bag ban: the loss of jobs.

Today, plastic bag manufacturing employs thousands of Californians, including the 175 workers at my factory in Union City. These good-paying manufacturing jobs — many of my workers make more than \$20 an hour with health and dental benefits — are at risk if this bill becomes law. Several thousand more of our residents working for suppliers to the industry could also be on the way to unemployment, and their families to public assistance.

Not to worry, says Assemblywoman Julia Brownley, D-Woodland Hills. She insists that there won't be job losses because companies that produce plastic bags will "retool" to make reusable bags.

What a joke. The type of reusable bag that Brownley wants can be competitively made only in China because of labor cost. Today, China and other low-wage Asian countries make virtually 100 percent of the reusable bags in the United States. If Brownley has a secret business plan for allowing domestic companies to compete with low-wage Chinese firms that face almost no regulation and are underwritten by the government, she should detail it. Until then, simply flipping the switch to produce reusable bags is not a realistic option.

The truth is Brownley has made her peace with sacrificing jobs during the worst labor market since the Great Depression in exchange for a supposed environmental benefit. The tragedy is that benefit won't materialize.

Why? First, in order to be used safely, reusable bags require that meat, fish and other produce get wrapped separately in plastic bags. And to reduce the risk of dangerous bacteria, including E. coli, reusable bags must be washed, requiring water, energy and polluting soaps.

Next, because consumers won't have plastic bags to line their garbage bags and to pick up pet waste, they will simply have to start buying those bags. In Ireland, where plastic bags were banned, plastic trash bag sales increased 400 percent, leading to no net reduction in plastics use.

Finally, so-called reusable bags are not really reused much. The U.S. has already imported nearly 3 billion of them — that's 10 reusable bags for every man, woman and child in the country. And those reusable bags are made of oil-based, nonwoven polypropylene, which is a plastic that can't easily be recycled. So when a reusable bag is not reused, it ends up as long-term waste, while a large percentage of today's U.S.-manufactured, natural gas-based retail plastic bags do get recycled and reused.

Finally, under the bill, paper bags can still be offered for 5 cents. But paper bags create 3.3 times more greenhouse gasses over their life cycle than plastics. Since most consumers will simply pay the nickel, California will end up with the equivalent increase in greenhouse gases associated with as many as 550,000 more cars on the road each year.

So let's add it up: Consumers will pay more, our state government will spend more, our state Senate will waste more time and thousands of jobs will be lost — Brownley's magic retooling proposal notwithstanding — all for dubious environmental benefit.

This is bad legislation. California deserves better. The Senate should do the right thing and shelve this ill-advised, job-killing proposal and get to work putting our state back to work.

KEVIN KELLY is CEO of Emerald Packaging Inc. in Union City and president of the California Film Extruders and Converters Association, which represents bag manufacturers. He wrote this article for this newspaper.