

Reusable Grocery Bags Now OK in Many Parts of California

By Debra Kahn

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Shoppers can now resume bringing reusable bags to the grocery store in most of California, after Gov. Gavin Newsom's executive order suspending the state's ban on single-use plastic bags expired Sunday.

Impact: With the expiration of [Newsom's April 23 order](#), grocery stores statewide will have to stop offering single-use plastic bags, and will have to charge customers for reusable or recyclable paper bags, in line with the state's regular requirements.

Background: In late March, it was a mark of the pandemic's severity that the San Francisco Bay Area [decided to ban reusable grocery bags](#) over the fear that they could transmit the coronavirus to store workers. Newsom followed suit with an executive order waiving the state's 2015 plastic bag ban for 60 days. It didn't apply to the 150 or so jurisdictions whose bag bans predate state law, including the Bay Area counties and others that followed their lead in suspending local plastic bag rules.

The group Californians Against Waste estimates that the suspension of the bag bans led to the distribution of as many as 1 billion single-use plastic bags in April and May, as stores ran out of paper bags and thicker, reusable plastic bags.

"The quick return to the practice of bringing reusable bags will reduce an unnecessary source of plastic pollution, reduce grocery costs for stores and consumers, and relieve the shortage of recycled paper bags," CAW executive director Mark Murray said.

What's next: Some of the local jurisdictions have since reversed their bans on reusable bags, while some haven't, creating a patchwork of local bans across the state. Alameda, Contra Costa, Santa Clara, Ventura and San Francisco counties have all begun reallowing reusable bags over the past few weeks, with the caveat that customers have to bag their own groceries, according to CAW's survey of county public health orders. There are still about 10 counties that have local orders prohibiting reusable bags, including Sacramento, Sonoma, Napa, Marin and San Diego counties.

San Francisco has flip-flopped in recent days, allowing customers last week to pack their own groceries in reusable bags before issuing [a reminder Monday](#) that bags are still prohibited under the county's shelter-in-place order.

"I don't think this is the highest priority for public health officers, so it may take some time for public health officers to update their guidelines," Murray said. "There's nothing that's

clear, and I'm hoping that maybe by next week, certainly I hope by the end of this month, we can be back to having consistency across the state."

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