Single-use plastic straws have recently come under fire, much like single-use plastic shopping bags and plastic microbeads. This year, Seattle became the largest U.S. city to ban the use of plastic straws and utensils, and Starbucks announced that it will eliminate its use of single-use plastic straws by 2020. The California Legislature is currently considering legislation to prohibit businesses from providing single-use plastic straws unless specifically requested by the customer; the legislation would impose a fine on food facilities in violation of the law.

The impetus for single-use plastic straw bans seems to be a combination of the amount of plastic pollution in the world’s oceans as well as a viral video featuring marine biologists removing a plastic straw from a sea turtle’s nostril.

According to an article published by National Geographic, “[i]n just the U.S. alone, one estimate suggests 500 million straws are used every single day. One study published earlier this year estimated as many as 8.3 billion plastic straws pollute the world’s beaches.”

The article also states that approximately 8 million tons of plastics flow into the ocean each year, and of that, straws comprise 0.025 percent. However, Greenpeace has said that single-use plastics including straws and utensils comprise 40 percent of the plastics found in the oceans. Only about 9 percent of plastic waste is recycled.

California is not the only state to propose straw legislation. Both Hawaii and New York considered banning plastic straws in 2018.

Hawaii state Sen. Karl Rhoads introduced Senate Bill 2285 in Hawaii this year. The bill sought to prohibit the “distribution, sale, and provision of plastic straws.” It would have established a fine and required violators to pick up litter or perform community service as well. The bill was unsuccessful.

In New York, Senate Bill 8873 also failed.

In addition to citing pollution statistics, proponents of single-use plastic straw bans and similar legislation also note that eliminating plastic straws does not require burdensome behavioral changes as most able-bodied people can go without them. Many proponents also openly acknowledge that banning plastic straws will not solve the pollution problem, but they do view them as the “gateway plastic”—banning single-use plastic straws will encourage people to forgo other single-use plastics.

Opponents of the legislation often ask what will replace single-use plastics and whether the alternatives will be better for the environment. As an example, when discussing single-use plastic bags, opponents often cite studies that have found paper bags to have a larger carbon footprint than plastic bags. The same may be true with paper or other biodegradable straws. Also noted by opponents, paper straws cost approximately four times what plastic straws do.
While most states have not proposed legislation relating to single-use plastic straws, many cities are taking up the issue and passing ordinances banning straws. This is a more piecemeal approach than that being taken by our counterparts in places such as the United Kingdom [15]. Despite this, however, single-use plastics have been and will continue to be a hot topic for state governments, and state legislators should keep informed of recent developments in cities in their states as well as actions taken by other state legislatures.

By:
Wednesday, July 11, 2018 at 12:33 PM
Tags:

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