California recently became the first state to restrict the distribution of plastic drinking straws in order to reduce plastic pollution and ocean waste.

The law, signed by Gov. Jerry Brown in September, will go into effect on Jan. 1, 2019. Full-service restaurants will be prohibited from providing single-use plastic straws to consumers unless the consumer requests a straw. In bars and restaurants across the country, plastic straws have become a popular target among those aiming to reduce waste.

“When I first introduced this bill, we generated a lot of national attention,” said Assembly Majority Leader Ian Calderon, the author of Assembly Bill 1884. “People started to pay more attention to the issue and specifically the number of straws they use every day.”

In a statement issued when he signed the bill, Brown described the pervasiveness of plastic in modern life. By 2015, the annual global production of plastic reached 448 million tons, he said.

“Plastic has helped advance innovation in our society, but our infatuation with single-use convenience has led to disastrous consequences,” Brown said in the statement.

Plastic in the ocean kills millions of marine animals every year. Brown said all plastics—including straws, bottles and bags—“are choking our planet.”

“It is a very small step to make a customer who wants a plastic straw ask for it,” Brown said. “And it might make them pause and think again about an alternative. But one thing is clear, we must find ways to reduce and eventually eliminate single-use plastic products.”

California has been a leader in offering solutions to the growing plastic pollution problem, Calderon said. The state has already reduced plastic bag and microbead usage through legislation.

“We’ve also proven that alternatives to single-use plastic products do exist,” Calderon said. “There are members of the Legislature who are always looking at ways to reduce Styrofoam and plastic products. We encourage the industry to move toward a more sustainable path for single-use plastics and commend those who are already on this path.”

Under the California law, a first and second violation would result in a notice of violation and subsequent violations could result in a $25 fine for each day the full-service restaurant was found in violation, but not exceeding an annual fine of $300.

Paper straws, one alternative to plastic straws, have become increasingly popular in bars and restaurants even in states and cities without bans on plastic.

Calderon said the issue would remain an important issue in his state Legislature for years to come. Meanwhile, some cities have already implemented straw bans and other states are looking at the
“California is not the only state with a solid waste problem,” Calderon said. “Straws can be found littered in communities in every state. New York is currently exploring similar legislation to combat their solid waste issue. Plastic pollution negatively impacts our food, drinking water, wildlife and fisheries, taxpayers’ wallets for cleanup, and can stifle recreation and tourism in afflicted areas.”

Seattle was the first city in the United States to ban plastic straws in restaurants. Plastic utensils were also included in the ban that went into effect on July 1. Businesses that fail to comply could be fined $250. Exemptions to the straw ban were made for people who need plastic straws because of a disability.

The Seattle Times reported in a June 19 article that the nationwide movement started after a video of a sea turtle with a straw stuck in its nose went viral in 2015. However, the ban in Seattle was first introduced 10 years ago. A 2008 ordinance was designed to stop the use of single-use plastics, but exemptions were made for several items. This year, those exemptions were not renewed when they expired on June 30.