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Plastic Bans To Solve Plastic Pollution



By [Gemma Alexander](#)

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Governments might finally be getting serious about plastic pollution. National and state governments [around the world](#) passed single-use plastic bans in 2022, but it's not big governments that are taking action. In fact, city ordinances started the plastic ban ball rolling. Individual citizens can lead the charge to ban single-use plastics from their communities.

Plastic Pollution

These bans are not coming a moment too soon. Plastic contributes to both pollution and climate change. Between [4% and 8%](#) of global oil consumption is related to plastic's life cycle. In the U.S., [232 million metric tons](#) of greenhouse gases are generated every year to produce plastic products that are often [used only once](#) and then discarded. Plastics incineration in the U.S. generates [5.9 million metric tons](#) of [CO2-eq](#). Disproportionately located in areas near impoverished communities and communities of color, these incinerators create

environmental injustice. Outside of the U.S., plastic is ^{CLOSE} burned in the open, where it [releases poisonous chemicals](#) with a global warming potential 5,000 times higher than carbon.

[Eight million tons](#) of plastic makes its way to [poison marine ecosystems](#) each year as part of massive [garbage gyres](#). Plastic does not biodegrade, but sunlight and heat do cause it to [release greenhouse gases](#) as it breaks down into [microscopic particles](#) that enter the food chain and bioaccumulate. The average person ingests about [5 grams of microplastic](#) per week (about as much plastic as a credit card) through food, water, and even the air we breathe. The long-term impacts on human health from ingesting so much plastic are unknown.

National Plastic Bans

Bangladesh was the [first country](#) to implement a plastic bag ban, nearly 20 years before more developed nations adopted the idea. In 2021, the [European Union](#) [banned](#) single-use plastic plates, cutlery, straws, balloon sticks and cotton buds; cups and food and beverage containers made of expanded polystyrene; and all products made of oxo-degradable plastic from sale in its member nations.

Although no longer part of the EU, the United Kingdom has its own parallel single-use plastic ban. At the beginning of 2023, Britain announced an [expansion of their ban](#) to include single-use trays, balloon sticks and some types of polystyrene cups and food containers, effective in October. In France, where the EU ban is in effect, they have also banned [plastic packaging](#) for produce. India, a nation with a population much larger than the entire European Union, instituted [its own single-use plastics ban](#) last year as well.

State Plastic Bans

The United States continues to be behind the curve on national environmental laws. But some states are taking their own action. In 2022, California's governor [signed SB 54](#), a bill that by 2032 will require all packaging in the state to be recyclable or compostable; reduce plastic packaging by 25%; and require 65% of all remaining single-use plastic packaging to be recycled. Although it is only one state, California has an economy on par with Germany as the fourth largest in the world. Compliance with California's law will have far-reaching effects.

California is notable for the broad range of plastics included in its ban. In most cases, plastic bans only address the kind of thin plastic bags used to carry purchases from grocery and retail stores. In 2021, there were seven states, plus the District of Columbia, with plastic bag bans. [Counties in Hawaii](#) have created a de facto statewide ban, with non-biodegradable plastic bags banned at checkout in Kauai, Maui, Hawaii and Honolulu Counties.

Globally, there is a trend of regional governments taking action before national ones. Before India's national ban in 2022, [four Indian states](#) had passed plastic bans, and at least half a dozen more had bills in progress. In the UK, [Scotland was the first](#) place to ban problematic plastic products.



Municipal Plastic Bans

The grassroots nature of plastic regulation is even visible at the municipal level. According to the nonprofit Surfrider, there are [more than 500 local plastic bag ordinances](#) in 28 states. In many cases, these statewide bans were preceded by municipal bag bans in major cities. The City of Seattle banned plastic [grocery bags in 2011](#); that law was superseded by a broader [statewide ban](#) in 2021. Besides outright bans, an even larger number of municipalities charge a fee or tax for plastic bags. For example, in Illinois there is no state law regarding single-use plastics, but Chicago [taxes plastic bags](#) and requires food establishments provide single-use food ware [only upon request](#).

Supporting Plastic Bans

For the biggest impact, you could lend your support to federal legislation. In 2022, Senator Cory Booker (D-NJ) and Representative Jared Huffman (D-CA) introduced the [Protecting Communities from Plastics Act](#). Let your [federal representatives](#) know that you want to see legislation like this passed in 2023.

Although municipal bag bans and, increasingly, broader bans of single-use plastic are becoming commonplace, so is backlash. Nearly twice as many states have laws preempting bans than actually have bans. Bag the Ban, a plastics industry organization that opposes plastic bag bans, maintains a useful [interactive map](#) of existing bag bans and preemptive legislation. If you are hoping to establish a ban in your community, the first step is to find out whether such a ban is legal in your state. If it is not, you will have to start by encouraging [your state representatives](#) to repeal the preemption.

In states that do not preempt plastic bags, there might already be a statewide bill in progress. There are many websites listing plastics regulations, but none summarizing pending legislation. Google your state + plastic ban to find out if there is a proposed bag ban and join the effort if you find one.

Starting a Municipal Ban

If there is not already legislation in the works, there are resources to help you establish a bag ban in your local community. Author Ted Duboise has tracked the progress of municipal plastic bans across the U.S. to develop a how-to guide for starting a plastic bag ban in your own town. His book, "[Initiate a Plastic Bag Ban](#)," contains stories of successful bans and an in-depth resource guide with reference legislation, attention-grabbing strategies, and a sample petition. Surfrider has a free [plastic bag law activist toolkit](#) that explains different types of bans and recommends ban structures and even clauses to include in draft legislation, together with guidance on how to conduct a campaign to raise support for your bag law.

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Gemma Alexander has an M.S. in urban horticulture and a backyard filled with native plants. After working in a genetics laboratory and at a landfill, she now writes about the environment, the arts and family. See more of her writing [here](#).

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