

Single-Use Plastic Foodware Ban

Reduce waste by replacing plastic foodware with natural, fiber-based, compostable options



The Impact

Plastic waste will be reduced dramatically, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, terrestrial and marine pollution, and needed landfill space for end-of-life disposal.

Description

An ordinance adopted by San Mateo County, Calif., that affects all food service establishments (FSEs) in cities and unincorporated areas of the county bans plastic for most disposable foodware. It allows use of natural fiber-based, compostable materials (such as paper, sugarcane and bamboo) for disposable plates, bowls, cups, food trays/boats, clamshells, boxes and other containers. These fiber items must not contain per- and polyfluorinated substances (PFAS). Compostable plastic lining (only) is acceptable for these items but must be approved by Biodegradable Products Institute, Compost Manufacturing Alliance or another third party approved by the county.

These materials requirements also apply to disposable side items (accessories) and their packaging, such as straw, stirrers, utensils and cocktail toothpicks. These accessories must be distributed only upon request and/or at dispensers that dispense one item at a time.

Background

California Gov. Jerry Brown signed AB 1826 in 2014, requiring all businesses to recycle their organic waste after 2016. As of September 2020, businesses that generate two or more cubic yards of organic waste per week were required to compost their waste. This increased scope of affected businesses was triggered because statewide organic waste was not reduced by 50 percent from 2014 levels.

Stakeholder surveys in Palo Alto, Calif., showed that one-third of FSEs were already providing some form of compostable foodware in 2018. Additionally, 52 percent of FSE respondents stated it

would be simple to transition to using compostable foodware. Palo Alto adopted a Zero Waste Plan in 2018, attempting to reach 95 percent diversion from landfills by 2030 to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Other cities throughout California have similar goals.

Where It's Been Implemented

As of June 2022, nearly all cities in San Mateo County had adopted the county's ordinance, with most taking effect October 1, 2022. Similar ordinances have been approved and implemented in other California cities, including Palo Alto, Berkeley and Santa Monica.

Key Drivers

Plastic pollution is one of the most serious environmental issues facing the planet today. Plastic can take centuries to decompose, causing harm to both terrestrial and marine ecosystems. Chemicals from both the manufacturing and disposal processes also have negative impacts on human health. Single-use plastics make up 40 percent of the plastic produced annually. Although there are plastic recycling options, foodware is typically contaminated by food waste and not economically viable for repurposing. In the U.S., only 8.7 percent of plastics were ultimately recycled in 2018.

Composting offers many additional environmental benefits, such as improving soil health, reducing the need for chemical fertilizers and reducing GHG emissions from landfills. Mandatory recycling of organic waste is a critical next step toward achieving California's aggressive recycling and greenhouse gas emission goals. Indeed, GHG emissions (especially methane) resulting from the decomposition of organic wastes in landfills have been identified as a significant source of emissions contributing to global climate change. Significantly reducing the amount of organic materials sent to landfills and increasing the production of compost and mulch are part of the AB 32 (California Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006) Scoping Plan.

Key Factors for Success

Local food service establishments will need to support the ordinance and comply with its requirements. Compostable foodware is slightly more expensive than its plastic counterpart. Palo Alto's staff has estimated that compostable utensils cost 1 to 2 cents more per item on average. This cost is expected to be passed on to the customer.

Key Obstacles

Getting businesses on board may present a challenge. Finding a trustworthy and reasonably priced compostable foodware vendor will be on the agenda for local food service establishments.

Surveys of stakeholders have shown heavy support and cooperation with the new measure. The ordinance is very straightforward and has been successful in other cities.

Timeline to implementation

San Mateo County's ordinance went into effect in March 2020 and was supposed to be enforced in March 2021 in the unincorporated areas of San Mateo County. Due to the pandemic and supply chain issues, enforcement was postponed until October 2022. This lag time allowed food service establishments to use up existing noncompliant stock and switch to compliant goods.

Next Steps

Cities throughout San Mateo County are invited to adopt the county ordinance. If updates are needed, the county will notify everyone of the recommended changes so that the ordinance remains uniform throughout the county. State legislators might urge a similar statewide resolution.

References and Resources

- Eun-Soo Lim, Senior Sustainability Specialist, County of San Mateo, Calif., eulim@smcgov.org, 650-599-1498
- San Mateo County's Foodware Aware Program, foodware@smcgov.org, 888-442-2666
- Paula Borges, Palo Alto, paula.borges@cityofpaloalto.org
- [Biodegradable Products Institute](#)
- [Compost Manufacturing Alliance](#)
- [San Mateo County Disposable Food Service Ware Ordinance and participating cities](#)
- [San Mateo County information and purchasing guide for food service establishments](#)
- [City of Burlingame's survey results visualization](#)
- [Palo Alto City Council's staff report on Foodware Reduction Ordinance](#)

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