

Q&A with Roxanne Spiekerman for the RRA

We're here with Roxanne Spiekerman, Vice President of Public Affairs for PreZero US, and spokesperson for the Responsible Recycling Alliance (RRA). The Responsible Recycling Alliance is a coalition of three prominent California recyclers and manufacturers – EFS plastics, Merlin Plastics, and PreZero US – and was formed to help California reduce, reuse, and recycle plastic waste across the state through effective education and legislation.

The RRA opposes AB 2236 and SB 1053, two bills pending in the California State Legislature that would eliminate the convenient reusable plastic film grocery bags that millions of Californians use – and reuse – every day. They support instead shifting to the responsibility to the plastics industry for recycling reusable plastic film grocery bags by integrating them into the Plastic Pollution Prevention and Packaging Producer Responsibility Program created in 2022 by SB 54.

Q: Roxanne. Thank you for being here and let's jump right in. What's wrong with the current bills as they stand today?

Roxanne Spiekerman: Let's start with some background. In 2016, California passed the most comprehensive bag legislation in the country – SB 270. Among other provisions, this law allowed for a reusable plastic film bag that is thicker and made with a minimum of 40% certified, post-consumer recycled content. In turn, this legislation helped develop a market for reclaimed plastic film that cannot otherwise be introduced into curbside recycling.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic saw the number of available recycling bins continue to shrink as many stores removed them. Grocers and other stores were not willing to keep their at-store recycling programs. At the same time, consumer behavior remained the same as did the need to reclaim plastic film, both of which are crucial.

So, fast forward to 2024. Now, we have these two bills, AB 2236 & SB 1053, on the floor of the California Legislature floor that seek to ban a single product – plastic film grocery bags – without any thought of a recycling solution for what to do with the millions of pounds of plastic film that exists in addition to just the grocery bags.

Furthermore, these proposals would ban the one product with a lower overall carbon footprint compared to any alternative products, including paper bags and canvas and sewn poly-woven or non-woven polypropylene bags that are not recyclable by any known method in the U.S., contain zero post-consumer content and are typically imported from overseas.

Q: Who gets hurt as a result of these bills?

RS: First and foremost, the environment. If we ban plastic film grocery bags, we're going to continue to increase the consumption of plastic film wraps, food bags, and many other coverings without an infrastructure to recycle them. Food bags are critical in extending the life food and helping to ensure health and wellness, so plastic film isn't going anywhere. And all these proposals would do is kick the can down the road, which won't help anyone. Material Recovery Facilities, or MRFs, are not adapting to taking this film, so there will be no home for any plastic film product aside from landfills.

Recyclers like PreZero, EFS and Merlin can recycle plastic film, but to do so, we need a sound infrastructure program to be able to collect it. Without this type of program, smart and efficient recycling will not happen the way it can and should.

Furthermore, grocers and the consumers will be hurt. The grocers will pay more for bags. They'll have to. Often times, they'll have to double bag with paper bags, as well as buy imported polypropylene bags. Consumers then get the short end of the stick – they are going to have to pay more for bags. Most consumers, even with the best of intent, only use a bag four to six times. So, you're going to have an alternative solution with a heavier carbon footprint that will be used only four to six times.

Q: Indeed. How do we protect the environment going forward?

RS: Well, as these bills are currently written, they move us further away from the comprehensive solution we all want. The solution begins with everyone seeing the issue for what it is – the opportunity to create a lasting framework for film circularity – not a one-off ban of a single product. The good news is that when we approach it in this context, there is a solution that works for every stakeholder.

Instead of the demonization of plastics, we need to start thinking about this as a serious recycling infrastructure problem which includes stakeholders that are invested in collecting this material, so it can stay circular.

The key to this solution is collaborating with all the involved stakeholders to emphasize – not ignore – the science that tells us how to proceed. More science and strategy and less emotion is the right way to approach what needs to happen here.

Q: And with that recommendation, what should the better approach for shoppers and grocers be?

RS: The current twin bills are not the answer. The better way forward is for our elected representatives to heed the need of Californians, work with consumers, grocers, as well as the plastic film manufacturers and recyclers, to develop the right solution that can be introduced in 2025. As it stands today, the two bills are not a beneficial solution for grocers. Again, grocers will need to charge more for the bags, which will lead directly to increased costs for customers who will have fewer alternatives. In fact, there will many times when double bagging with paper bags will be needed, and as currently amended, paper is the only bag that would be allowed at the point of sale or in the check-out lane.

Furthermore, these two bills will remove the reusable bag provisions altogether. That means they will open the floodgates for basically anything – heavy non-recyclable plastic bags, and beyond – to be offered within a grocery store of more than 10,000 square feet, so long as whatever else is sold is just not at the end of the check-out lane.

And that's one of the biggest unintended consequences of these bills.

Q: I read that poll you did recently – which indicated that California residents don't like what they're seeing. Is that right?

RS: That's correct. I truly believe that even the best-intentioned Californians really want a sound solution for the environment – me included. We truly want to do what's best for the environment. However, the sad thing is, we are really letting the sensationalism against plastic distract from the science here.

And that's really becoming an issue. Because every Californian that is truly invested in the environment is going to want the best option based on the science.

And as you mentioned, the May 2024 poll that the RRA conducted found that a strong majority of almost 60% of Californians favor taking a better and more productive approach to the current legislative proposals that would ban reusable plastic film grocery bags and cripple the industry's ability to recycle them.

Q: Now that you've detailed the problem. What's the solution? What's the right path going forward? And what are the elements of that path?

RS: It starts with behavior and changing the narrative, and when it comes to quantitative solutions, we need our legislators to understand that we need a sound solution that is more comprehensive than just another knee-jerk bag ban.

We want them to understand that the enormous amount of plastic film and packaging that are used to keep food fresh and safe – among many other uses – should be part of the ultimate circularity solution. Keeping that material out of landfills and, instead, adding it to the volume needed to make recycling work, is absolutely the right way to go.

We need to implement a solution for all flexible packaging. There are recyclers like PreZero who are ready, willing, and able to reclaim this material. But we need the material back.

Q: What do you think should be done now, with the two bills as they currently stand. Do you want to amend those? Do you want to pause that conversation tactically? What are you looking at?

RS: The first step is not to rush these bills through the Legislature. It's more important to pass the right piece of legislation, not the legislation we have right now. These bills may look good on the surface, but, as they currently stand, their drawbacks outweigh their benefits.

Instead, we need to take a step back and recognize that we need to work together to develop and enact an overall solution that protects the environment, grocers, and consumers at the same time. It can be done. We at the RRA are eager to be a part of this solution.

To that end, in 2022, we passed one of the most comprehensive Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) programs here in California. That's SB 54.

The intent of SB 54 is to take all products that are single use and make sure they are either recyclable or compostable. As a result, we believe that the most effective and practical answer is to treat all plastic film bags the same as we would other items under SB 54 and find a viable solution for recycling.

Q: So, what I'm hearing you say is that now is the time for legislature to take a pause. Be thoughtful, work collaboratively with everyone, and then come back next year with a with a newer, more sustainable and inclusive solution. Is that right?

RS: Absolutely. Rushing to pass something now, and then having to deal with the crisis of not having a viable plastic film recycling program in the future will not do us any good. In fact, it's a big step backward.

Making sure we put the right sustainable solution in place now will ensure that plastic film will be ably recycled long into the future. We owe it to everyone to get this right.

Q: That's very helpful. Thanks for being with us Roxanne.

RS: Thank you so much.