

San Francisco enacts broad ban on foam cups, coolers, toys

July 9 2016, by Janie Har



This July 6, 2016 photos shows foam cups, left, displayed on a shelf at a market in San Francisco. Consumers won't be able to buy polystyrene kiddie floats, egg cartons, or coolers in San Francisco after supervisors approved what environmentalists are calling the most comprehensive ban in the country on the cheap insulating foam. (AP Photo/Jeff Chiu)

San Francisco, say goodbye to those squeaky, Styrofoam-like coffee cups that have long been a staple of picnic outings.

In fact, people in San Francisco won't be able to buy polystyrene foam coolers, kiddie pool toys or packing peanuts after supervisors approved a measure in June that goes far beyond the prohibition on foam food carryout containers in effect in dozens of cities and counties.

Environmentalists are cheering San Francisco's ban as the most comprehensive by a large U.S. jurisdiction on the cheap insulating foam that cushions goods and keeps drinks hot or cold. They say the lightweight plastic is extremely slow to decompose, and it pollutes waterways, harming marine life and birds.

Detractors, however, say the legislation does nothing to stop foam-wrapped goods that are shipped into the city—such as heaters, computers and just about everything else—defeating San Francisco's stated purpose of reducing waste. They'd rather San Francisco recycle the product.

What's formally known as "expanded polystyrene" is the latest plastic to be targeted by cities and counties, much like the single-use plastic bag, which San Francisco outlawed in 2007. Most people recognize the material by its brand name Styrofoam, although Styrofoam is not used to make disposable cups or packing peanuts.

The San Francisco measure builds off a 2006 ordinance mandating food vendors and restaurants use recyclable or compostable carryout containers. That meant no puffy polystyrene.

Cities such as Seattle, Los Angeles, and Portland, Oregon, followed suit. New York City tried, but a state judge last year overturned a ban on plastic foam containers and packing peanuts, saying they could be recycled.

A 2015 study found 8 percent of microscopic particles found in the San

Francisco Bay were identified as foam, likely from polystyrene products, said Rebecca Sutton, a senior scientist with the nonprofit San Francisco Estuary Institute. Overall, the amount of plastic bits found in the bay was seven times greater than in Lake Erie, which is the most polluted of the Great Lakes.

"It's a timely response to recent studies that show the San Francisco Bay contains an abundance of micro-plastics, including foam fragments, that come from plastic products that fragment easily," said Miriam Gordon, California Director of Clean Water Action.



This July 6, 2016 photos shows foam egg cartons displayed on a shelf at a market in San Francisco. Consumers won't be able to buy polystyrene kiddie floats, egg cartons, or coolers in San Francisco after supervisors approved what environmentalists are calling the most comprehensive ban in the country on the cheap insulating foam. The ban on plastic foam, better known as Styrofoam, even applies to meat trays packed inside city limits, although it will not prohibit supermarkets from selling pre-packaged cuts of beef or Amazon from shipping

your heater in foam. (AP Photo/Jeff Chiu)

Debbie Raphael, director of the San Francisco Department of the Environment, acknowledged the city can't control its borders but said it can lead the way.

"Like so many of the policies that start in San Francisco, we're hoping that this policy gets picked up in surrounding communities and at the state level so its maximum impact can be realized," she said, adding that San Francisco's contracted garbage company cannot recycle the product.

Businesses are on board, said Jim Lazarus, a senior vice president at the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce, committed to the city's goal of sending nothing to landfill by 2020.

"It's just a fact that a lot of polystyrene ends up in landfill," he said, "and where there are reasonable alternatives, packaging options, we support that."

The measure prohibits San Francisco businesses from using the material to sell goods, so butchers within city limits, for example, can't use the foam to wrap meat and poultry.

But the city can't stop meat packed elsewhere from using foam trays. It can't stop Amazon from shipping people their new electronics in foam.

And that's why Walter Reiter, deputy director and legal counsel for the EPS Industry Alliance, said the ordinance is a sham. The alliance represents businesses that make and use expanded polystyrene. It is pondering a legal challenge.

"It's going to do nothing about the protective packaging coming in," he said. "I don't know how it reduces their waste stream."

San Francisco Supervisor London Breed proposed the ordinance. The ban on the retail sale of [foam](#) goods is effective Jan. 1. The prohibition on meat and fish trays is effective July 1.

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