

Ban on hotel toiletries is latest effort to curb plastic waste

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Love those dainty little bottles of shampoo, conditioner and hand lotion

in hotel bathrooms? Do you take them home, use them for guests or donate them to the local homeless shelter? You won't be able to for much longer—states, localities and some hotel chains are scrapping the tiny amenities.

The bottle bans follow recent efforts to curb other single-use [plastic products](#), including shopping bags, eating utensils, straws and balloons. Supporters say the moves will reduce the amount of plastic waste filling landfills and polluting the seas.

California enacted a law earlier this year, set to take effect in 2023, banning the mostly 1- to 2-ounce bottles. New York state is considering a similar measure, and local jurisdictions such as Fulton County (Atlanta), Ga., also are getting into the act.

Even without legislation, Marriott International, Hyatt Hotels and the company that owns Holiday Inn plan to replace the single-use bottles with large pump dispensers. Marriott said eliminating 500 million small bottles a year will save 1.7 million pounds of plastic.

But opponents worry about the economic hit to the personal product and plastics industries, and many see meddling by the state in personal choices. The plastics industry opposes the bills because "product bans are not a long-term solution to the plastic waste issue," said Shannon Crawford, spokeswoman for the Plastics Industry Association. "Expanding and enhancing our current recycling infrastructure is."

Travel industry analysts say hotels—with the possible exception of very high-end lodging where luxury amenities are part of the experience—should welcome the bans as a money-saver. They also will help hotels appeal to environmentally conscious customers.

"I see what's going on with hotels as part of this larger trend," said Henry

Harteveldt, president of Atmosphere Research Group in San Francisco, a travel analytics firm. "None of these small actions will save our planet individually. But collectively, if we can reduce waste, it's good."

But he pointed out that the hotels' actions are not completely selfless.

"It's what I call a 'greenwashing' move," he said. "The hotels are wrapping a sustainability message around a move that will help them save money on toiletries. There's nothing wrong with saving money on toiletries, and it will reduce some waste."

Many hotels already post signs urging guests to reuse their towels as a way to save water—an environmentally friendly move that also happens to reduce laundering costs.

The California law will prohibit a container of 12 ounces or fewer from being set out in hotels unless a customer asks for one. In general, hotels plan to replace the small bottles with multi-use dispensers mounted on shower walls. Hotels with more than 50 rooms must comply by 2023 and smaller hotels by 2024. The bill does not apply to Airbnb or other short-term rental platforms.

"This bill is a win-win (for industry)," said California Assemblyman Ash Kalra, a Democrat from San Jose. "It does force the issue by putting in a timeline when they have to phase out (the bottles). Ultimately they save money, but you have to have this instigation to get them moving. Just because it's a cost savings doesn't mean hotels are going to do it, because there's an upfront cost for dispensers."

But opponents, like California Republican Assemblyman James Gallagher, who voted against the bill, said it's too much fuss over not very much.

"Let's start with the fact that, in California, we have wildfires, power outages, skyrocketing crime, homelessness and poverty. I feel like banning shampoo bottles is not high on the priority list for me," he said in a phone call. "I don't really think it's that much of a problem. They (the bottles) can be recycled. I kind of like the shampoo bottles. I take them home with me."

The new law puts pressure on the [hotel](#) industry. Wyndham Hotels had resisted making the switch, with marketing representative Noelle Nicolai telling The Wall Street Journal in May 2018 that the little bottles, done correctly, "can be one of the top drivers of delight and guest satisfaction." Now the chain is "working on eliminating single-use plastic," according to a statement emailed to Stateline.

"We are exploring viable alternatives," Wyndham spokeswoman Jane Danese said in the statement, "including, but not limited to, straws, utensils, containers and packaging to offer our owned and managed properties while ensuring a positive guest experience."

Industry expert Harteveltdt said guests' reactions sometimes depend on the brand of shampoo and body wash being handed out by the hotels. "If they are mainstream brands, there may be nothing special about them in terms of taking them home. But if they are premium brands ... bringing them home to use or even raiding the housekeeping cart may be part of the experience that the guests get."

Reneta McCarthy, senior lecturer in the Cornell University School of Hotel Administration, said the little soaps and shampoos are "a piece of that marketing message, the memory of that experience—maybe you have a basket in your bathroom, so when a guest comes they can choose a shampoo or whatever."

But, she said, if the hotels save money on the little bottles, perhaps they

could put that money into high-end products in larger dispensers to enhance the experience of staying in that accommodation.

Kalra said he hopes more states, cities and hotels look to California as a model. One reason some hotels signed onto the new law, he said, is that they didn't want to have to deal with smaller jurisdictions one by one. Kalra's legislation was modeled after Santa Cruz County's ordinance.

The California movement inspired similar legislation in New York. Long Island Democratic state Sen. Todd Kaminsky has introduced legislation that he hopes to pass after the legislature convenes in January. The New York bill also would go into effect in 2023 for large hotels and 2024 for hotels with fewer than 50 rooms.

Kaminsky said he also was persuaded by personal experience. "My time as a legislator in Albany requires me to stay many nights in hotels," he said. "During the day, I was hearing about a plastic crisis in our country." He estimated hotels in New York City alone use more than 27 million tiny plastic bottles a year, based on data from the InterContinental Hotels Group.

The World Bank reported that in 2016 about 242 million tons of plastic waste was produced worldwide, making up 12% of all municipal solid waste. Solid waste overall is expected to grow to 3.4 billion tons annually by 2050, the bank said.

After China, for decades the largest importer of used plastic, last year tightened its standards for what scraps it would accept, recycling has become harder and more cities and towns have reduced their programs.

"In light of what California has done and what we are doing, hotel chains see the handwriting on the wall," Kaminsky said. As for consumers, he dismissed the idea that they might suffer from "environment fatigue"

with all the new anti-plastic regulations.

"The other way to look at it is that we have been polluting the waters and streams for decades and it's not getting better; we're using more and more [single-use](#) (plastics) every year. It will be a little disruptive, but we owe it to the planet to do this."

But the [plastics industry](#) maintains that banning its products is not necessarily planet-saving. Tony Radoszewski, president of the Plastics Industry Association, testified to Congress just last month that some product bans force consumers to switch to something even worse for the environment.

For example, he said, California's plastic bag ban in 2016 "led to an increase in carbon emissions due to increased paper bag usage as well as skyrocketing trash bag sales, which use more plastic." Without the free plastic bags from stores, consumers might buy new plastic bags for uses such as lining trash cans.

He cited a January 2019 study from the University of Sydney that found when California eliminated 40 million pounds of plastic carryout bags, purchases of new [plastic](#) trash bags increased by 12 million pounds, meaning that nearly 30% of the reduction was negated by new bag purchases.

Kalra said there was brief consideration during debate on how his bill might harm homeless shelters and groups that feed, clothe and tend to those living on the street. Small bottles of soap, shampoo and other personal care items often are distributed to the homeless, who can't carry around large containers of liquid.

Michael Ferrell, executive director of the Coalition for the Homeless in Washington, D.C., said when people donate toiletries "we certainly make

use of them," but the group also purchases small bottles in bulk, he said. He said the donations come sporadically.

"We are more likely to get them toward the end of the year or the beginning," he said, dates that coincide with the end of holiday season giving and the end of the holiday travel period.

Kalra had another idea.

"It wasn't lost on me that could be a concern," he said. "Look, the hotel industry is saving a lot of money with dispensers; if they donate even a fraction of what was given to the homeless," that could help.

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