

South Australia Sets May for Plastic Bag Ban

By Kate Tilley | PLASTICS NEWS CORRESPONDENT

ADELAIDE, AUSTRALIA (Jan. 19, 2009 1:30 p.m. ET) -- The South Australian provincial government has stepped up its campaign to encourage consumers to reject lightweight polyethylene shopping bags as it moves towards a ban on their use by May.

The state's tactics, backed by new laws imposing heavy fines for breaches by shopkeepers and bag suppliers, is not supported by the top trade group for Australian retailers, which prefers a voluntary scheme currently being developed by other states and territories.

SA decided to go it alone with an outright ban after Australia's federal government and the nation's other state and territory governments decided in June against outlawing polyethylene grocery bags, commonly given free to consumers at supermarket checkouts.

At the time, federal Environment Minister Peter Garrett estimated about 4 billion bags are used each year in Australia.

Since the start of January, the SA government has been running a public and retail industry education campaign with the theme "Bring Your Own Bags" to raise awareness of the May deadline and promote what it says are more environmentally friendly bags.

The campaign involves in-store signage, brochures and posters, a dedicated Web site and a toll-free phone service offering consumers and retailers advice about sourcing alternative bags.

SA late last year introduced legislation to phase in the total ban beginning on May 4. The Plastic Shopping Bags (Waste Avoidance) Act will prohibit retailers from selling or giving away PE carry bags less than 35 microns thick.

During the phase-in period from Jan. 1, retailers can still stock the bags, but must provide alternatives so consumers have a choice.

After May 4, only compostable plastic bags that meet Australian Standard AS4736-2006 will be permitted as grocery bags. SA will continue to allow PE bags used for holding fruit and vegetables, meat or other perishables. Retailers can continue giving away thicker plastic shopping bags, such as those traditionally used by department stores and fashion outlets and branded with their name or logo.

The SA law contains penalties of \$A5,000 (US\$3,400) for retailers who do not provide alternative bags during the phase-in period or provide banned bags after May 4. A spokesman for SA Environment Minister Jay Weatherill said no prosecutions had been launched under the new law so far.

The law also protects retailers from unwittingly buying banned bags and supplying them to customers. Suppliers face a fine of up to A\$20,000 (US\$13,640) if they knowingly provide a retailer with outlawed bags.

SA's phase-in education campaign aims to have retailers and consumers switch to cloth or paper bags. "We're banning the type of bags that sit in landfill and take hundreds of years to break down," Weatherill said.

In November, Garrett and other environment ministers, except Weatherill, maintained their opposition to a legislated ban.

At a ministerial meeting they considered results of a trial conducted by the Victorian Government in which consumers were charged A10 cents (US6cents) for each plastic shopping bag they used. The Victorian Government claimed the trial at three locations in the state saw use of the bags drop 79 percent.

The ministers agreed to pursue with the retail industry a voluntary approach to cutting bag use, with a strategy devised by the Victorian, Tasmanian and Australian Capital Territory governments to be considered at the ministers' next meeting in April.

A spokeswoman from the Australian National Retailers' Association (ANRA) said it opposed a legislative ban. "We respect consumers' right to choose and our members are continuing to encourage shoppers to switch to reusable bags," she said.

ANRA also does not favor a charge for plastic bags, such as that imposed in the Victorian trial. "ANRA participated in [the Victorian] trial to understand the type of issues that would arise if a charge on plastic bags was introduced in Australia," the spokeswoman said.

"The trial highlighted some practical problems which many would not have expected — slower service times and occupational health and safety concerns arising from customers insisting staff overfill bags, for example."

She said ANRA maintains that awareness and education campaigns are the best ways to help consumers voluntarily make the switch to environmentally friendly bags.

Weatherill's spokesman said SA viewed itself as a pioneer in moves to cut use of plastic bags and has received positive feedback for its approach from consumers and the retail sector.