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LOS ANGELES TIMES

We will be known by the junk we throw away

September 12, 2007

Yuck.

That was the first word that came to mind Tuesday morning as I stood on the befouled banks of Compton Creek, wondering whether to wade into the rank, trash-strewn sludge.

I was in search of discarded plastic bags along with James Alamillo and Kirsten James of Heal the Bay, which is urging Los Angeles County officials to ban the ubiquitous sacks. A study by the county Department of Public Works, requested by Supervisor Yvonne B. Burke, has turned up a number that stunned county officials and Heal the Bay's president, Mark Gold.

Roughly 6 billion plastic bags, most of them from supermarkets and other retailers, are used each year in Los Angeles County. And only about 5% of them are recycled.

"I was completely shocked," said Gold. He knew from seeing the bags blowing down highways, trapped against fences and littering vacant lots that the problem was huge. But 6 *billion* bags? No wonder a million Pacific seabirds and 100,000 sea mammals die annually from discarded bags and other debris that make their way into the ocean.

"Our reliance on single-use packaging materials just doesn't make sense. When you think about it, the life of that bag could be 10 minutes between the time we leave the store and get home."

Gold had directed me to Compton Creek, near the Crystal Park Casino and Hotel, for a quick glance at the kind of junk that eventually washes into the Los Angeles River and out to sea. Alamillo and James assured me we'd find bags floating, buried under the low brush and waded around trees and bushes, so we slipped on knee-high rubber boots and slogged into the cesspool.

The bags were indeed easy to find, mingled in with a flotilla of trash that had traveled for miles through a maze of storm drains and catch basins, or had simply been dumped into the creek. The collection was an indictment of our slovenly, junk-food, single-use, throwaway society.

Bobbing in the muck, along with enough takeout Styrofoam containers to fill a cargo

ship, were cans, bottles, bags and wrappers for Lays potato chips, Pepsi, Sprite, Bud Light, Nesquik, Starbucks, McDonald's, El Pollo Loco, Cup O' Noodles, 7-Eleven, Denny's, Fuddrucker's, Miller Genuine Draft, Target, Walgreen's, Wal-Mart, Aquafina, Rite-Aid, Circle K, Food 4 Less, 99 Cents Only, K-Mart, Home Depot, Albertson's, Vons, Sears and more.

Does anyone use a trash can?

"You've got a bag stuck to your boot," James informed me.

Indeed I did. A Lays potato chip bag, dripping with black and green muck.

One of the more remarkable sights was along the creek bank, where plastic bags and other trash from years past could be seen woven into the earth, a window into our past. A million years from now, archaeologists will dig into the layers and know us by the junk we ate and the natural habitats we destroyed.

Burke said the county spends millions of dollars trying to clean up this mess each year. That cost is partly what motivated her to follow the lead of San Francisco, which earlier this year approved a phased-in ban on the use of traditional plastic bags in supermarkets and pharmacies. Those stores can use recyclable paper and compostable bags or provide reusable bags.

Burke said she wanted a study of alternatives for Los Angeles, which doesn't have a composting facility. So Fred Rubin and Paul Alva of Public Works led a team that worked with environmental groups and the grocery store lobby and came up with several recommendations.

One alternative is a ban on plastic bags at grocery and drugstore chains, but Burke said the county would have no authority to impose the ban on the 88 municipalities in the county. She prefers a second recommendation that would initially involve voluntary cooperation from grocers and municipalities, with a ban imposed in 2010 if bag consumption doesn't decrease by 35%, or if it hasn't dropped by 70% by 2013.

Burke said she wants grocers to impose a fee of up to 20 cents per bag so customers are encouraged to switch to reusable bags.

Once you've been to Compton Creek, it's hard to understand why the county or any city would need several years to phase in a ban. The city of Los Angeles has just begun offering residents the option of putting plastic bags in their blue recycling bins, but it's too soon to know what the impact will be, and you'd expect a lot more of a city whose

mayor has said he wants L.A. to be the greenest city in the country.

The supervisors and L.A. city officials ought to set an example by taking the lead on a ban, if you ask me. But Lisa Foster of 1Bagatatime, which sells reusable bags to Ralphs and Ace Hardware and was involved in the Public Works study, said she sees great value in a public education program that leads consumers to voluntarily do the right thing.

"Australia instituted a voluntary reusable bag program and the government took on the role of educating consumers," said Foster, who said she was offered a free reusable bag when she shopped at a Melbourne grocery store.

People need to know that to manufacture 14 plastic bags requires enough petroleum to drive a car one mile, Foster said.

Or that the average person uses 500 bags a year, and that it costs 17 cents to recycle each bag.

Much of this information is available at www.1bagatatime.com, and more is available at www.healthebay.org, along with a petition urging supervisors to ban plastic bags.

The latter website has information on this Saturday's coastal cleanup day, with a list of locations where people can volunteer to collect trash, including Compton Creek.

Burke said she expects supervisors to begin debating a course of action in the next few weeks, but on this issue, no one needs to wait for marching orders.

Next time you're asked the paper or plastic question, the answer is neither.

For a buck or two at Whole Foods or Trader Joe's, among other places, you can go reusable.

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