

## **Paris to Ban Non-Biodegradable Plastic Bags Next Year**

By Lisa Bryant

Paris

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**The city of Paris has decided to ban non-biodegradable plastic bags in large stores as of 2007, in an effort to cut down on pollution. The City of Lights is hardly the first to tackle its plastic woes. From Paris, Lisa Bryant reports for VOA that from Ireland to South Africa, the throwaway bag is heading for the dustbin - of history.**

It is six p.m. on a weekday evening in northern Paris, and Charles Chetrit is fielding his usual crowd of customers shopping after work.

Chetrit rings up their groceries and then offers them an item that will soon be disappearing from the city: A disposable, plastic bag.

One customer, Frederic Nogray, refuses the offer.

Nogray says he never uses plastic bags because they pollute the environment. Instead, he takes a rolling cart on his errands, which French housewives traditionally used for shopping.

That shopping cart may be making a comeback next year, when a municipal law banning stores from offering non-biodegradable plastic bags goes into effect. Sturdy, light, convenient - and best of all free - plastic bags hardly seem to be in the same pollution league as earth-warming carbon dioxide emissions or toxic waste.

But experts say these disposable bags account for 8,000 tons of waste generated in Paris each year, at a cost of more than \$2 million. And burning plastic bags to dispose of them poses a health hazard.

Besides taking a bite out of the city's garbage problem, the leftist government of Paris Mayor Bertrand Delanoë wants to change Parisians' habits. Yves Contassot, the man responsible for environment and waste at the Paris city hall, explains.

Contassot says plastic bags are just one lesson about the dangers of overpackaging, and of using petroleum-based products to make these non-renewable bags. Parisians need to economize resources by managing them better, Contassot says. It's a question of environmental responsibility.

Contassot's arguments are increasingly being voiced by politicians elsewhere in France. Indeed, the French island of Corsica was the first to ban plastic bags in large stores, in 1999. And by 2010, these bags will be outlawed across the country. Many large French retailers have already banned the throwaway sacks, with dramatic effect. Seven years ago, some 17 million plastic bags were used in France, compared to only six million used today, says Serge Orru, head of World Wildlife Fund France, an environmental nonprofit.

It's true that plastic bags are not good for the environment, Orru says, but they're not the most polluting substance around. Just as important is that French people become aware they're living in a throwaway society.

French aren't the only ones getting that wakeup call. It's been sounding in Israel, Canada, western India, Botswana and Kenya. Countries like Tanzania, South Africa, Taiwan, Singapore and Bangladesh have also banned or are moving toward banning the plastic bag. Ireland took the lead in Europe, slapping a tax on plastic bags in 2002. The Irish government says the levy cut the use of disposable sacs there by a stunning 90 percent. The tax raised millions of dollars in revenue.

The island of Zanzibar also slapped a moratorium on plastic, arguing discarded bags were destroying its marine environment and hurting its tourism industry. The Rwandan government also banned plastic bags this year, citing environmental concerns.

In Europe, the bans are a boon for a new industry: Creating biodegradable bags made of starches from a variety of plants, like potatoes or corn.

"We are at the beginning of this market," says Christophe de Boissoudy, head of Novamont, an French-Italian business that's Europe's leading generator of this new biodegradable substance. "For the moment, we can see [estimate our market share] at about point eight percent of the plastic bag market. But we can see a very big entrance of this new plastic."

Especially with government support, de Boissoudy says. The bags have one other advantage: They move Europe, and the rest of the world, one step away from depending on petroleum based products: In this case, the traditional, nonrenewable bags.

But not everybody is happy with the bans. Critics say substitute bags, made of biodegradable substances, are expensive. Others fear job losses in the plastic bag making industry. And in Rwanda, some people accused government militias of stealing goods they carried in now illegal plastic bags.

In Paris, store owner Chetrit is also skeptical about the new plastic bag ban. Not so long ago, he tried to end the use of plastic bags at his store, offering sturdier ones instead but at a price. The customers weren't pleased.

We lost a lot of clientele, Chetrit says. Some bought our reusable bags, they're only 60 centimes. But most of the clientele didn't like them. They said: Where are the bags? They like to use them as garbage bags.

Environmentalists like World Wildlife's Orru say that mentality will change.

After getting used to a life without disposable bags, Orru says, people might start thinking twice about other throwaway products, like plastic bottles, non-renewable batteries, or kleenex. He believes life in Paris, and elsewhere, can be lived well using less.