

Airport's Ban on Plastic Water Bottles a Flight of Fancy

Politicians in California like to show how much they care about making the world a better place by banning things. Making the world a better place isn't something they seem to care much about, however, because if they did, they would be doing very different things.

As Exhibit A, please consider San Francisco's new ban on sales of bottled water at the city's international airport, which just took effect on August 20, 2019. The *Wall Street Journal's* Andy Kessler [considers a scenario](#) that may become all too common thanks to the city's new law aimed at inconveniencing air travelers passing through SFO:

After running late for your flight after a 30-minute security line only to have TSA confiscate your Fiji water bottle, you'll now have to stop at a crowded water fountain to fill your own metal flask. Or buy an overpriced glass or aluminum bottle at the concession stand, paying another 10 cents for a bag. And your teeth will chatter if you drink through a paper straw. Of course you could risk dehydration instead: Men lose up to a half-gallon of water during a 10-hour flight. Oddly, you can still buy sugary drinks in plastic bottles at SFO; only healthy, calorie-free water is banned in plastic. You can't make this stuff up.

It's not that city officials don't like the idea of people buying overpriced bottled drinks at the city-owned airport. Rather, it's the idea of people buying water in plastic bottles that upsets them – especially because of what they seem to think happens with all those bottles after air travelers drink the water in them.

The *San Francisco Chronicle*'s Dustin Gardiner [quotes](#) state senator Scott Wiener's justification for state politicians' efforts to ban all things plastic in California:

'Plastics are frankly strangling the health of our oceans,' Sen. Scott Wiener, D-San Francisco, said as the Senate debated SB54 last month. 'This is a huge problem, and it's time to move past baby steps to address it.'

A huge problem, indeed. According to the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, [over 8 million metric tons](#) of plastic waste flows into the oceans every year. If California's politicians think they are going to have a meaningful impact in solving that problem with the actions they take, they must also think Californians are major contributors to that problem.

Are they really?

A [study](#) by Germany's Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research suggests that over 90 percent of all the plastic waste in the ocean flows into it from just 10 rivers. Alex Gray of the *World Economic Forum* [reports](#):

By analyzing the waste found in the rivers and surrounding landscape, researchers were able to estimate that just 10 river systems carry 90% of the plastic that ends up in the ocean.

Eight of them are in Asia: the Yangtze; Indus; Yellow; Hai He; Ganges; Pearl; Amur; Mekong; and two in Africa – the Nile and the Niger.

According to [National Geographic](#), "relatively little plastic waste enters the ocean from North America and Europe because of their more robust waste-management systems."

Californians may not be as environmentally destructive as state politicians believe.

But perhaps that's not true in San Francisco, if politicians from that city think their latest ban on sales of water in plastic bottles at the city's airport will have a noticeable impact on the global problem of plastic waste being dumped in the oceans.

Let's play pretend and say that instead of disposing four million plastic water bottles with a robust waste-management system, San Francisco's politicians allow city employees at the airport to dump the bottles into San Francisco Bay each year to flow out into the Pacific Ocean and add to the global plastic waste problem.

Before the ban took effect, San Francisco's airport was selling [4 million water bottles each year](#). Assuming all were half-liter containers, each weighing [9.3 grams](#), that amount of plastic bottle waste would total 37.2 metric tons. If the public employees of the airport were dumping that many empty plastic water bottles into San Francisco Bay, it would account for 0.000465 percent of all the plastic waste flowing into the world's oceans each year.

An effective solution to that hypothetical problem wouldn't be to ban the sale of water in plastic bottles at the airport. It would be to establish and operate an effective waste management system for the city while also banning the city's employees from dumping empty water bottles into the bay. If they already had done all that, why not focus on making their system work better?

Do you suppose that common sense solution occurred to the politicians? Or do you suppose they cared more about showing how much they care about the environment without really caring enough to do anything to noticeably improve it, regardless of whatever harm and inconvenience they might impose upon the dignity of air travelers passing through the city's airport?

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