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The Honorable Gavin Newsom
Governor, State of California
State Capitol, First Floor
Sacramento, CA 95814

June 16, 2020

Dear Governor Newsom:

Thank you for your ongoing leadership during the pandemic and for prioritizing the health and safety of all Californians at this difficult time.

In an abundance of caution, you exercised your authority in the early days of the COVID-19 crisis to “temporarily allow retailers, particularly grocery stores, to provide bags to consumers without charge, and to pause redemption of beverage containers in-store to mitigate the spread of COVID-19” and suspend California’s state ban on single-use plastic bags via Executive Order N-54-20. As we emerge from this crisis and learn more about the risk of viral spread, I write today to request that you not extend the 60-day rollback of the ban on single-use plastic bags and instead provide greater clarity and robust guidance to California’s grocery stores and retail outlets based on recently released Cal-OSHA guidelines on how to safely use reusable grocery bags.

Since 1972, Ocean Conservancy has worked to promote healthy and diverse ocean ecosystems and oppose practices that threaten ocean and human life. Based in Washington, D.C., Ocean Conservancy has also worked in California for over 30 years to promote ocean conservation, secure the state’s network of marine protected areas, promote sustainable fisheries, and address plastic pollution. Our annual International Coastal Cleanup (ICC) has mobilized over 16 million volunteers around the world (including 75,000 Californians in 2019) to rid our beaches, waterways and ocean of trash, much of it plastics. For decades, plastic grocery bags have been in the “top 10 list” of items collected by ICC volunteers; last year alone, over 17,000 plastic bags were found by Californians in a single day. Meanwhile, research suggests that plastic bags are among the deadliest forms of marine debris, easily confused for jellyfish and other prey by turtles, whales and other ocean animals.

California has been – and must continue to be – a leader in advancing solutions to this problem. In 2016, California voters overwhelmingly supported Proposition 67, which removed thin, single-use plastic bags from grocery stores; since that time CalRecycle has reported an over 85% reduction of single-use plastic bags in the state. This good work must continue.

Public health and safety and environmental protection are not incompatible and we must not let the coronavirus crisis derail the state’s vital efforts to address plastic pollution. It is important to note that at present there is no credible, scientific evidence suggesting that single-use plastic bags are any less likely to be contaminated than other grocery store surfaces, nor are they an effective form of protection against the coronavirus. In fact, the latest science indicates just the opposite. A peer-reviewed study in

the New England Journal of Medicine published earlier this year shows that COVID-19 viral particles were “more stable on plastics and stainless steel than on copper and cardboard, and viable virus was detected up to 72 hours after application to these (plastic) surfaces.” This suggests that bags made of paper and other non-plastic materials are likely to pose a lower risk of disease transmission than those made of plastics.

The pandemic has already led to a surge in single-use plastics consumption, from food delivery packaging to personal protective equipment (PPE). As Californians begin to restart their lives, there is little scientific reason to revive the single-use plastic bag and undermine individual Californians’ efforts to lead a more sustainable, low-plastic lifestyle. Instead, we encourage you to ensure that the Cal-OSHA guidelines¹ are more widely understood by grocers and retailers across the state. This guidance recommends that when customers bring their own bags to stores, they should be asked to leave these bags in the shopping cart and bag their own groceries.

In a time of great uncertainty, your decision to suspend the single-use plastic bag ban was decisive and signaled the severity of the pandemic to all Californians. But as the health crisis stabilizes and the science surrounding COVID-19 matures, Ocean Conservancy requests that you act just as decisively by allowing the ban on single-use plastic bags to go back into effect to ensure the dual goals of human health and a healthy ocean for all the state’s residents.

We also encourage you and the state legislature to continue to address the global problem of plastic pollution – especially given strong public support for addressing this issue. California’s leadership can be a model for other states and the federal government to follow. Scientists estimate that over 8 million metric tons of plastic pollution flows into the ocean each year – roughly one dump truck of plastic waste every minute – with impacts across the ocean food web, from the smallest zooplankton to the largest whales to the fish we eat. Scientists estimate that humans ingest the equivalent of roughly one credit card of plastic per week through the water, fish, and plants we consume. Continued California leadership is needed to address this global problem.

Ocean Conservancy looks forward to continuing to work with you and the state legislature to ensure California advances public policy that comprehensively addresses plastic pollution.

Thank you for your ongoing leadership,



Janis Searles Jones
Chief Executive Officer
Ocean Conservancy

¹ <https://www.dir.ca.gov/dosh/Coronavirus/COVID-19-Infection-Prevention-in-Grocery-Stores.pdf>