

US: Hawaii weighs first-in-nation plastic bans at restaurants

19/03/2019 17:36 by admin

Dozens of cities across the country have banned plastic foam containers, but Hawaii's measure would make it the first to do so statewide.

The Hawaii efforts would be stricter than in California, which last year became the first state to ban full-service restaurants from automatically giving out plastic straws, and broader than in Seattle, San Francisco and other cities that have banned some single-use plastics. (Representational Image)

Honolulu: Hawaii would be the first state in the US to ban most plastics at restaurants under legislation that aims to cut down on waste that pollutes the ocean.

Dozens of cities across the country have banned plastic foam containers, but Hawaii's measure would make it the first to do so statewide.

The liberal state has a history of prioritising the environment – it's mandated renewable energy use and prohibited sunscreen ingredients that harm coral.

A second, more ambitious proposal would go even further and prohibit fast-food and full-service restaurants from distributing and using plastic drink bottles, utensils, stirring sticks, bags and straws.

The Hawaii efforts would be stricter than in California, which last year became the first state to ban full-service restaurants from automatically giving out plastic straws, and broader than in Seattle, San Francisco and other cities that have banned some single-use plastics.

Activists believe the foam container measure has a better chance of passing in Hawaii.

“We have this reputation of setting the example for the world to follow, and that's what we're trying to do here,” state Sen Mike Gabbard, lead author of the more ambitious measure, said to the Senate.

“Our state can once again take the lead in protecting our environment.” Gabbard, father of Democratic presidential candidate and US Rep.

Tulsi Gabbard, said 95 per cent of plastic packaging worldwide is thrown out after being used once.

In the US, 500 million plastic straws are used and thrown out every day, he said.

Discarded, slow-to-degrade plastic is showing up at sea, as in a massive gyre northeast of the Hawaiian islands, and on beaches.

Plastics also contribute to climate change because oil is used to make them, said Stuart Coleman, Hawaii manager for the Surfrider Foundation.

Eric SS Wong, co-owner of two fast-food establishments on Oahu, said not being able to serve food in plastic foam containers would drive up his costs at a time when he faces rising health insurance charges for his employees and a possible minimum wage hike that lawmakers also are considering.

He said heâ€™ll have to raise prices.

â€œNow all of the sudden, your familyâ€™s USD 30 dining experience became USD 37 or USD 38,â€• Wong said.

His Wiki Wiki Drive Inn takeout counter in Honolulu sells sandwiches, breakfast meals and Hawaii favourites like Loco Moco, which features white rice topped with a hamburger patty, fried egg and gravy.

A package of 200 foam boxes costs him USD 23, while the same number of biodegradable boxes would cost USD 57, he said.

Chris Yankowski of the Hawaii Restaurant Association, which represents 3,500 restaurants, said lawmakers are trying to do â€œtoo much too fast.â€•

Yankowski, who is also president of Triple F Distributors, argued that good alternatives to plastic products are not yet available.

Hawaiiâ€™s cities and counties also donâ€™t provide composting facilities, so there is no organised place to dispose of compostable containers that lawmakers say restaurants should use instead, he added.

â€œItâ€™s almost like we want to do great things for the environment, but weâ€™re not ready to handle it when we change it over,â€• Yankowski said.

The Hawaii Food Industry Association, which counts the stateâ€™s biggest supermarkets and convenience stores as members, initially opposed the foam container ban but now supports it.

The group said in written testimony that itâ€™s encountered difficulties coping with varied local regulations and it wants the state to create a consistent standard.

Two main counties â€” Hawaii and Maui â€” have already adopted plastic foam bans.

Mauiâ€™s took effect on December 31, while Hawaiiâ€™s takes effect on July 1.

The association still opposes the broader measure, which also would ban plastic garbage bags.

The president of Island Plastic Bags, a Hawaii company that makes plastic bags, said the legislation would prohibit his company from selling trash bags to nursing homes and hospitals as well as restaurants and hotels.

Grocery stores wouldnâ€™t be able to sell trash can liners, Adrian Hong said in written testimony.

It would create a â€œpublic health crisis,â€• he said.

Gabbard said his proposal was in the early stages so lawmakers have time to address such concerns.

The state Senate has passed both bills. They still must get through several House committees and the full House before heading to the governor.

Cindy McMillan, a spokeswoman for Gov. David Ige, said he hasnâ€™t stated a position on the measures yet.

Justin Macia, a pharmacist in Honolulu, said he would like people to use less plastic and stop using plastic foam entirely because of how long it takes to degrade.

Cardboard containers would be a great alternative, he said.

“It’s definitely something that’s got to go,” he said, after eating a sandwich from a foam takeout box.

- AP