

Plastics lobby gets positive message about industry into textbooks

By Susanne Rust, California Watch

Under pressure from the American Chemistry Council, a lobbying group for the plastics industry, schools officials in California edited a new environmental curriculum to include positive messages about plastic shopping bags, interviews and documents show.

The rewritten textbooks and teachers' guides coincided with a public relations and lobbying effort by the chemistry council to fight proposed plastic bag bans throughout the country. But despite the positive message, activists say there is no debate: Plastic bags kill marine animals, leech toxic chemicals and take an estimated 1,000 years to decompose in landfills.

In 2009, a private consultant hired by California school officials added a new section to the 11th-grade teachers' edition textbook called "The Advantages of Plastic Shopping Bags." The title and some of the textbook language were inserted almost verbatim from letters written by the chemistry council.

Although the curriculum includes the environmental hazards of plastic bags, the consultant also added a five-point question to a workbook asking students to list some advantages. According to the teachers' edition, the correct answer is: "Plastic shopping bags are very convenient to use. They take less energy to manufacture than paper bags, cost less to transport, and can be reused."

Americans use an estimated 100 billion plastic shopping bags

each year – almost all of which are thrown into the garbage. Grocery stores and other retailers spend about \$4 billion a year to purchase the bags for customers.

“The American Chemistry Council obviously got engaged to protect their bottom line,” said Sen. Fran Pavley, D-Santa Monica, author of the 2003 legislation requiring that environmental principles and concepts be taught in the state’s public schools. She had been unaware of the lobby’s efforts until contacted by California Watch.

Read the whole story