

Australian official leads push for plastic-bag ban

By Tim Johnston

SYDNEY: The Australian environment minister said Thursday that he hoped to ban all plastic shopping bags by the end of this year, a move that would go one step further than China, which said this week that it would ban ultra-thin bags and make retailers charge for others.

"There are some four billion of these plastic bags floating around the place, getting into landfill, ending up affecting our wildlife, and showing up on our beaches while we are on holidays," Environment Minister Peter Garrett said.

"I think most Australians would like to see them rid.

"We think it's absolutely critical that we get cracking on it," Garrett, the former leader of the rock band Midnight Oil and a longtime environmental campaigner, said.

Garrett, a leader of the Labor Party, said he hoped to phase out plastic bags in Australia by the end of 2008 and planned to meet with state officials in April to figure out how that could be done.

The Labor Party was swept to power late last year, partly on the back of its promise to tackle the country's environmental challenges.

In December one of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's first actions on assuming office was to sign the Kyoto Protocol on the Environment, reversing years of opposition by his predecessor, John Howard.

The global momentum against plastic bags is growing.

On Tuesday, China said on the official government Web site that it would ban free plastic bags starting June 1. The thinnest bags will be banned outright,

and stores will be forced to charge for thicker, more durable bags.

The government called for "a return to cloth bags and shopping baskets to reduce the use of plastic bags." The move follows restrictions in South Africa, Ireland, Taiwan and Bangladesh, which has banned all bags.

Australia had an early role in the war against plastic shopping bags. In 2003, the small community of Coles Bay, in Tasmania, became the first plastic-bag-free village in the world.

The move against plastic bags was led by Ben Kearney, who runs a bakery and café in Coles Bay.

He estimated that the initiative in the village, which only has 200 residents but caters to 250,000 tourists a year, had saved over a million plastic bags since its inception.

"It's been a matter of changing people's habits," he said, "and it has become a way of life for locals now, and tourists appreciate it."

But not everyone is pleased with the move.

Richard Evans, who is the chief executive of the Australian Retailers Association, believes it will be counterproductive.

"This is populist politics at its worst," Evans said Thursday.

"Everyone would agree that they don't like to see plastic bags blowing down the street and floating in our waterways, but this is a litter issue, not a legislative issue."

Evans said that it was still unclear which bags would be banned, and he asked about the future of garbage can liners and freezer bags.

He said that the association's research showed that householders recycled the majority of supermarket



Reuters

China has already moved to ban ultra-thin bags and make retailers charge for others.

plastic bags for garbage disposal.

And he questioned the environmental argument.

"We get paper bags from pulping trees — and that is supposed to be better?" he asked. "What's wrong with biodegradable plastic bags?"

Evans said that his members wanted more discussion and pointed to the fact that supermarkets had led the charge to cut plastic pollution, reducing the number of bags they use by 50 percent from 2002 levels.

"The devil's in the detail," he said. "We need more leadership than legislation."

■ New York orders recycling

Large stores throughout New York must provide bins for recycling plastic bags under a bill passed Wednesday by the City Council, The Associated Press reported from New York.

The measure requires stores that occupy 5,000 square feet or more, or that have more than five branches in the city to install plastic bag recycling bins. The bags must read: "Please return this bag to a participating store for recycling." Stores will be required to report to the city on the number and weight of bags that are collected.