



THE TIDINGS

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Beyond the Spoon: California’s New Plan to Prevent Plastic Pollution

By Kathleen Nay

Last month, we learned the unsettling fact that there is so much plastic exposure in our environment that scientists have actually found a spoon’s worth of plastic embedded in our bodies and brains. Not a spoonful, mind you — but instead, enough microplastic particles to match a spoon’s mass. Yikes!

Plastic contamination is pervasive in our modern lives. Plastics and plastic-derived chemicals make their way into our bodies via the packaging of foods we consume, the personal care items we use in our hair and on our skin, and in the household products we use to clean our homes. The most visible of these, of course, is the plastic we encounter every day: in the grocery aisle, our takeout bags, and ultimately, when we pull it out of the lake.



Lake Merritt Institute youth volunteer pulls out plastic bag covered in algae from Lake Merritt.

In theory, we could start to see fewer plastics in our homes and the lake. That’s the intention of newly-enacted **Senate Bill 54: the Plastic Pollution Prevention and Packaging Producer Responsibility Act**, which puts the onus on producers to reduce plastic pollution caused by their products as of May 1, 2026, when the regulations officially took effect.

SB 54 was originally signed into law in 2022, the most ambitious packaging law in the U.S. to date. While its implementation initially encountered some setbacks (Governor Newsom directed the state to revise the original draft regulations due to concerns about excessive costs for businesses and consumers), the final rule was eventually adopted last month after multiple rounds of public comments and hearings. The law sets forth several goals for 2032:

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- **Producers (food, consumer goods, beauty products, and retail shipping) must reduce plastic packaging by at least 25%.** They can do this by eliminating unnecessary packaging, switching to non-plastic packaging materials, or introducing refillable systems.
- **All packaging must be either recyclable or compostable in California.** The intent is to eliminate packaging that is technically recyclable, but not actually recyclable through California’s standard systems.
- **Plastics must meet increased recyclability rates, in a phased approach:** 30% of all packaging plastics must be recyclable by 2028, 40% by 2030, and 65% by 2032.
- **Importantly, producers must pay to clean up plastic pollution.** Companies that put plastic packaging into the California market and aren’t otherwise able to comply with the law must join a producer responsibility organization (PRO), which takes fees from participating companies to cover the cost of recycling and composting efforts, collection and administrative systems, and environmental mitigation. PROs are tasked with collecting and distributing \$500 million annually for 10 years (a total fund of \$5 billion).

This marks the first piece of legislation that requires producers, instead of municipalities or individuals, to pay for mitigation. 60% of the funding is meant to be used toward monitoring and reducing the historical and current health impacts of plastics, with the majority reserved for low-income, disadvantaged, or rural communities. The remaining 40% is to be administered by conservation and wildlife agencies to mitigate the effects of plastic pollution on marine, aquatic, and terrestrial life.

How is this likely to affect Lake Merritt? The answer is mixed. At the end of the day, Lake Merritt is still a watershed basin into which stormwater and urban runoff drain, bringing streams of litter that originate from throughout the city. No matter where a piece of litter starts, it’s very likely to end up in the lake unless it’s intercepted before hitting a storm drain. The new law also doesn’t account for illegal dumping, encampment-related waste, cigarette butts, or the other countless miscellaneous items LMI volunteers encounter on cleanup missions.

What is likely to change, however, is the composition of materials we remove from Lake Merritt’s water and shoreline. Assuming companies comply with the law, we’re likely to find less styrofoam and plastic, and more compostable, fiber-based materials. SB 54 is, appropriately, a systemic intervention meant to shift responsibility further upstream, to the companies that produce and profit from plastic packaging in the first place. But its targets are still years away and will require regulatory follow-through and compliance from those same companies.

Still, it marks an important and welcome shift in thinking about how to curb plastic pollution, and is a reason to be cautiously optimistic. Until then, Lake Merritt will continue to need her community. That’s you and me — volunteers, donors, and neighbors, pickers in hand.

This article was inspired by [Saving Our Seas \(SOS\): Compounding Catastrophe, Parts 1 & 2](#), a 2025 video docuseries produced by the Monterey Bay Aquarium and KTLA. You can read about the UNM study here: [Brain tissue may contain higher amounts of microplastics than other organs: Study - ABC News \(link\)](#).

THANK YOU!

LAKE MERRITT INSTITUTE VOLUNTEERS!
- MAY 2026 -
5,850 GALLONS OF TRASH REMOVED
294 VOLUNTEERS



SPECIAL THANKS TO OUR MAY GROUPS:
FRANKLIN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, PARK DAY MIDDLE SCHOOL
RUNNING FOR A BETTER OAKLAND, EMERSON ELEMENTARY
APRIO, MONTCLAIR ELEMENTARY, A-TEAM, LPUMC YOUTH,
ECONOMIC & PLANNING SYSTEMS TEAM, ROUX INC GROUP

SUMMER EVENTS AT LAKE MERRITT



SUMMER PUBLIC CLEANUPS

Join **Lake Merritt Institute (LMI)** volunteers and honor our beautiful city with a lake cleanup.

Register online at: lakemerrittinstitute.org



LMI @ Friday Nights at OMCA

June 12th 5-7:30pm

Free Live Music by the Kim Nalley Band with vocals that blend jazz, blues, and soul. Stop by our **Lake Merritt Institute** table at OMCA Garden for fun activities and learn more about our efforts. Can't make it? Save the date and join us on 7/17. *We're looking for steward volunteers to help us table, reach out at info@lakemerrittinstitute.org*



Bird Walks at the Lake

Join Hilary Powers any fourth Wednesday of the month for a bird walk at the lake.

Register at goldengatebirdalliance.org



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Are you a local business or organization interested in partnering with us to support Oakland's Crown Jewel? Ask us about sponsorship opportunities in 2026 at info@lakemerrittinstitute.org

Support Lake Merritt Institute today!

As a non-profit we rely on community contributions to sustain year-round cleanups and water quality advocacy. With funding becoming increasingly uncertain, your contribution helps us maintain consistent operations and continue showing up for the wildlife, volunteers, and community that depend on a healthy Lake Merritt. Every donation makes a difference. Donate today at Lake Merritt Institute and help keep Lake Merritt clean, healthy, and thriving for all. Donate today on our website at www.lakemerrittinstitute.org.

For questions and comments please email us at info@lakemerrittinstitute.org.

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