

**CALIFORNIA WATCH – AUGUST 19, 2011**

**Environment, K–12 | Spotlight**

**Plastics industry edited environmental textbook**

**August 19, 2011 | 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."

Help us do more..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[PDF] 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.

The environmental curriculum, which took seven years to develop, is being tested at 19 school districts that include 140 schools and more than 14,000 students. An additional 400 school districts have signed up to use the curriculum, according to Bryan Ehlers, the California Environmental Protection Agency's assistant secretary for education and quality programs.

Other states have expressed interest in adopting the California curriculum, including Delaware and Maryland, Ehlers said.

**Touted as the first public-private partnership of its kind, the trade group's edit of California's school curriculum illustrates a growing concern for special-interest influence over public**

**education. It also shows how school officials abandoned some of their responsibility to write curriculum, handing the heavy lifting over to a paid consultant.**

Just this month, Scholastic Inc. – a major textbook publisher – promised to limit its practice of collaborating with corporations to produce classroom materials. The New York-based publisher had been under pressure from parents and education groups to stop distributing a fourth-grade curriculum paid for by the coal industry.

The new California curriculum covers science, history, social studies and arts and weaves in environmental principles and concepts over 85 units and hundreds of pages. The full-color pages of the curriculum, which can be downloaded off the state’s website, mirror the look of a textbook. Teachers are encouraged to use the materials as handouts in the classroom and as reading assignments for students.

**“Parents should be outraged that their kids are going to be potentially taught bogus facts written by a plastic-industry consultant suggesting advantages of plastic bags,” said Mark Murray, executive director of Californians Against Waste, a recycling and environmental lobbying group.**

The chemistry council declined to comment in detail about its work on California’s environmental curriculum. But its views were made known to the state during a period of public review and comment.

“The ACC takes exception to the overall tone, instructional approach, and the lack of solutions offered – most especially the lack of mention of the overall solution of plastic recycling,” wrote Alyson Thomas, senior account executive with Ogilvy Public Relations Worldwide, a lobbying firm retained by the trade group.

“We believe education works best when students are exposed to all viewpoints, alternatives and attitudes, particularly when addressing socially complex issues” such as plastic bags, she continued.

**Kenneth McDonald, spokesman for the California Department of Education, said he was not aware that the trade group’s edits had been included. He said the development and editing of the content was Cal/EPA’s responsibility.**

The education department’s sole duty was to review the curriculum for accuracy, content and overt bias, he said. “Whether or not there was corporate input, nothing problematic was seen,” he said of the changes.

After hearing from California Watch about the chemical industry additions and edits, Pavley said she would write to Cal/EPA to ask officials to tweak the current text to remove some of the trade group’s additions. She was quick to add that the rest of the curriculum was excellent and the result of “an open, transparent, multi-stakeholder process.”

“A lot of people took the time to participate, and other interest groups took the time to review the curriculum,” she said.

## **Consultant integrates lobby's critiques**

As Cal/EPA began preparing the curriculum in 2004, it called together a team of stakeholders – including industry trade groups and environmental organizations – to provide advice on writing the new curriculum.

A representative from the American Chemistry Council was present at the meeting. So were representatives from oil giant BP, National Geographic and the California Ocean Science Trust. The American Chemistry Council did not provide any financial backing to the development of the curriculum.

By 2009, the curriculum was mostly written, and the chemistry council once again weighed in with criticisms and suggested edits for a section in the 11th-grade text that portrays plastic bags as harmful to the environment.

At the time, the trade group was fighting state and city plastic shopping bag bans across the country. In 2010, it successfully quashed legislation that would have banned plastic bags in the state. It was not so successful in San Francisco and Los Angeles County, which in recent years have imposed bans.

**Although the trade group will not say how much money it spent on advertising and lobbying the issue, state documents show the group has spent more than \$9 million lobbying government agencies since 2003.**

**The state had handed the bulk of the curriculum development and editing responsibility to Gerald Lieberman, director of the State Education and Environment Roundtable.**

The roundtable is a nonprofit group originally developed by 16 state departments of education to enhance environmental education in schools. According to Cal/EPA, the state has paid Lieberman's organization nearly \$2.4 million between 2004 and 2010 for consulting. Lieberman said the state gave him discretion over whether to include editorial suggestions and comments from outside sources in the curriculum copy.

**“I had total control, really, about what comments I accepted or didn't accept,” he said. “Even the ones that came internally. I was happy to have that. It meant I could get it done the way I thought was best.”**

**The first edit of the teachers' edition had been highly critical of plastic shopping bags. It highlighted the long decomposition rate of the bags and their threat to marine life and ocean health. That information remains in the text.**

**A letter with the chemistry council's comments about the 11th-grade curriculum was presented to Lieberman in 2009 as submissions during a nine-month public commenting period. The state received hundreds of comments from a variety of groups, including private**

**individuals, environmental organizations, and other agencies within the state and federal governments.**

“We made numerous changes in various EEI (Education and the Environment Initiative curriculum) units during and as a result of multiple stages in the review process,” Lieberman said. “I never made changes to the text anywhere, in any of the units, that I didn’t see as improving the educational value of the materials, or I would not have made the changes.”

Lieberman incorporated nearly all of the trade group’s suggestions into the teachers’ edition, which provides the context and lesson plan for the course. The 11th-grade course is entitled, “Mass Production, Marketing, and Consumption in the Roaring Twenties.”

Lieberman added the section on the benefits of plastic bags, after the chemistry council complained in a letter: “To counteract what is perceived as an exclusively negative positioning of plastic bags issues, we recommend adding a section here entitled ‘Benefits of Plastic Shopping Bags.’ ”

He also removed a mention of plastic bags as “litter” in the teachers’ edition after the trade group’s representative complained. “To be clear,” wrote the Ogilvy executive, “plastic bags don’t start as litter; they become litter. ...” Now, when the word litter appears in the text, it is prefaced with “can become” or is used as a verb.

**Lieberman also changed key statistics in the text to reflect the American Chemistry Council’s preferred numbers.**

Citing a passage in the original version, which showed that Americans recycled only about 1 percent of plastic bags, Thomas recommended using numbers from a 2007 U.S. EPA report on municipal waste. According to Thomas, that report showed that nearly 12 percent of plastic bags and film are recycled annually.

The report does indicate that certain kinds of plastic bags, wraps and films are recycled at around 12 percent. But when all types of plastic bags, wraps and films produced in the United States are included, only about 9 percent were recycled in 2007.

Murray, of Californians Against Waste, said a better and more accurate figure – one that only looks at plastic shopping bags – is from the state, which in 2009 reported a 3 percent recycling rate.

The environmental curriculum nevertheless now includes the 12 percent recycling rate suggested by the chemistry council.

Mark Gold, president of Heal the Bay, a Santa Monica group that pushed for an environmental curriculum in California schools, said: “I’m not happy with the language in the unit, but the state followed the process, and the process was designed to ensure that the units were accurate, factual instead of dogmatic, and were consistent with state standard.”

## Researchers find harm to marine life

The chemistry council claims that plastic bags are not a “two-plus-two problem with only one correct answer.” By rewriting the curriculum, the lobbying group was attempting to suggest there was a legitimate debate about the harm caused by plastic bags to the environment.

But the issue is straightforward, said Wallace J. Nichols, a researcher with the California Academy of Sciences who has studied the effect of plastic debris on sea turtles: Plastic bags, which are made from high-density polyethylene, are harmful.

“Plastic shouldn’t be inside a sea turtle’s stomach. It is not good,” Nichols said. “I don’t know what kind of balance you add to that statement. The plastic takes up space that should be occupied by food.”

In June, a team of researchers at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography reported that 9 percent of fish collected from the “Great Pacific Garbage Patch” – a gyre of plastic debris, estimated to be larger than the state of Texas, swirling in the middle of the Pacific Ocean – had plastic in their stomachs.

“Industry would like us to focus on the functions and conveniences of plastic bags and ignore the costs,” Nichols said. “I think it’s getting harder and harder to ignore the costs. I think we’re at a tipping point.”

The National Geographic Society, which provided consultation, maps and visuals to the entire K-12 curriculum text, was not aware of the trade group’s edits, according to a spokeswoman. “National Geographic did not have a role in final editorial decisions,” said Mimi Koumanelis.

According to the state, slightly more than \$200,000 has been donated to print and deliver the curriculum to California public schools. Donors included the Sempra Energy Foundation and First Republic Bank. The Packard Foundation and Seventh Generation, a green-products manufacturer, provided nearly \$300,000 to curriculum development.

State officials said any errors found in the text would be corrected in future versions. “Is it perfect? No,” said Ehlers, the Cal/EPA assistant secretary. “We think it is excellent given the process.”

Others worry about the influence of profit-driven corporate lobbyists over public education.

“It’s like church and state. It wouldn’t be OK for a religious society to influence public school textbooks. So, is it OK for the private sector to influence education?” said Ellen Wright, an educational consultant who helped spearhead the project. “I don’t think private interest is the way to go.”

## **New Environmental Curriculum**

**According to Cal/EPA, the following schools have implemented the new Education and the Environment Initiative Curriculum:**

1. Alternative, Community & Correctional Education Schools & Services (ACCESS)
2. Barstow Unified School District
3. Calaveras Unified School District
4. Carmel Unified School District
5. Galt Joint Union Elementary School District
6. Gateway Unified School District
7. Glendale Unified School District
8. Guerneville School District
9. Manhattan Beach Unified School District
10. Manteca Unified School District
11. Napa Valley Unified School District
12. New Haven Unified School District
13. Pasadena Unified School District
14. Poway Unified School District
15. Rocklin Unified School District
16. Ross Valley School District
17. San Diego Unified School District
18. Santa Cruz City Schools
19. Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District

**The following schools field tested the curriculum between 2007 and 2009, and have used a variety of versions.**

1. Albany Unified School District
2. Elk Grove Unified School District
3. Escalon Unified School District
4. Galt Joint Union High School District
5. Lompoc Unified School District
6. San Francisco Unified School District