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## California weighs mattress recycling fee

Proposed legislation would require the industry to recycle old mattresses. Some legislators estimate a \$25 fee paid by consumers would be sufficient.

March 28, 2013 | By Marc Lifsher, Los Angeles Times

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SACRAMENTO — California has lumber taxes, tire taxes, Internet sales taxes and insurance taxes. Now some companies are losing sleep over a proposed mattress tax.

Two bills making their way through the Legislature would make the Golden State the first in the nation to charge a recycling fee on new mattresses. The idea is to require the industry to reclaim the springs, wood and fiber from millions of old mattresses that plug landfills and clutter Southern California streets every year.



A discarded box spring is propped against a vacant store on Avalon Boulevard. (Bob Chamberlin, Los Angeles...)

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Some legislators estimate a \$25 fee paid by consumers would be sufficient to finance a recycling program.

"Why not put an extra tax on it?" said Los Angeles resident Jackie Hunsicker. "The problem with these mattresses is they are very dangerous. People dump them on the highway or they fall off trucks."

#### Quiz: How much do you know about California's economy?

Hunsicker, who is tired of seeing used mattresses on the side of the road near her Mulholland Drive neighborhood, has created a volunteer clean-up squad. She's supporting statewide efforts to enlist the industry in the recycling effort.

Manufacturers aren't taking the proposal lying down. They're warning of higher prices for consumers and contend that any recycling should be handled by the industry, not government.

"It's a recipe for chaos," said Ryan Trainer, president of the International Sleep Products Assn.

Last year, an industry coalition killed a recycling bill by Sen. Loni Hancock (D-Berkeley). Now she's back with a similar proposal. Industry and environmental advocates say that some sort of mattress recycling legislation is likely to pass this year.

Hancock's bill would require mattress manufacturers to recycle 75% of used mattresses by 2020. To pay for it, manufacturers would be free to charge fees to retailers or consumers.

Hancock said she structured her bill so that recycling fees are charged by mattress makers, not the state, to avoid triggering Proposition 26. That 2010 ballot measure defines most new fees as taxes, thus requiring approval from two-thirds of the Legislature.

The industry doesn't like the new proposal any better than the last.

"Hancock's bill sets arbitrary and unworkable targets for recycling in terms of quantities to be recycled," said Trainer, the trade group leader.

Instead, mattress makers and retailers are sponsoring a rival bill, SB 245 by Sen. Lou Correa (D-Santa Ana). While still in development, it's expected to require the state to set a recycling fee that would be paid by consumers, thus forcing a supermajority vote from the Legislature. Correa's bill would require the state fee to be deeply listed as sales receipts, much like oil recycling fees are currently.

state fee to be clearly listed on sales receipts, much like our recycling fees are currently.

Anti-tax activists contend that the last thing California needs is one more tax or fee.

"We're not big fans of this," said John Coupal, president of the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Assn. "If disposal of mattresses is a statewide problem and one that's impacting the general public, then maybe the general fund should pay for it."

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Californians buy about 4 million new mattresses and box springs a year. About half the time, the used mattresses that they replace end up in guest rooms or go to friends or relatives. Many of the other 2 million discarded units get dumped on streets or sent to landfills.

Fewer than 1 in 10 is recycled for wood, plastic, fiber batting and springs to be used in other products, such as steel and carpet padding.

Discarded mattresses cause blight on urban streets and are magnets for mold, rats, insects and other vermin. The city of Oakland spends \$200,000 a year to pick up old mattresses that have been dumped illegally on city streets, according to a survey done by Hancock's office.

"It's a huge problem," said Michael Herling, who owns a building maintenance firm in West Oakland. "The mattresses and illegal dumping lead to graffiti, which leads to the idea that you can do whatever you want in Oakland."

Recycling proponents estimate that California's largest cities annually dispose about 470,000 mattresses and box springs at a cost of \$20 million. The city of Los Angeles said it collects about 300 mattresses a day.

Old mattresses also are nightmares for landfill operators because each piece takes up 23 cubic feet, doesn't decompose, and "floats to the top" of dumps because of its flexible construction, said John Bell, director of green business solutions for Hope Services Monterey, a nonprofit recycler. Steel springs "can wreck a \$50,000 piece of equipment in a second," he said.

Passing a mandatory recycling law would create jobs and boost the nascent recycling business, which needs more volume to survive, said Terry MacDonald, executive director of DR3 Recycling in Oakland. "I would tool up for this instantly."

Sacramento-based Sleep Train Mattress Centers, the West's biggest-volume independent dealer, says that 85% of the used mattresses it picks up are either refurbished or recycled. However, none of the state's three nonprofit recycling organizations reports getting any material from Sleep Train or other major sellers.

Retailers, though, insist that they're committed to keeping old mattresses off the streets.

"Mattress dumping has become such a huge issue because there are companies that are not taking responsibility to recycle in the right way," said outspoken Larry Miller, chief executive at the Sit 'n Sleep bedding chain, whose zany television ads promise super-low prices. Recycling "is the right thing to do for business and the community."

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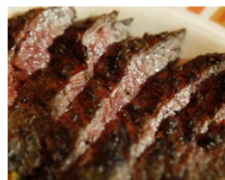
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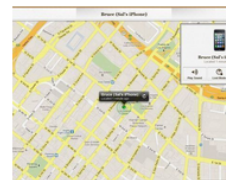
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