

Agreement reached on plastic bags

The Environmental Affairs and Tourism Ministry, labour and business have signed an agreement on new regulations governing plastic shopping bags.

The agreement, which comes into effect in May next year, was signed by Environmental Affairs and Tourism Minister Valli Moosa, and representatives from the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu), National Council of Trade Unions, the Chemical and Allied Industrial Association and the Plastics Federation of South Africa.

Government reached a compromise with business and labour that gives plastics manufacturers a five-year window period to comply with the new rules. The compromise effectively defuses the stand-off that arose over contentious elements of the regulations that were promulgated in May this year concerning the minimum thickness of plastic bags and when the new regulations were to be enforced. Government was pushing for thicker bags to make recycling viable.

The agreement reached this week is that the thickness of plastic bags will remain at 30 microns, but also that manufacturers will be able to continue using their existing machinery to make bags of 24 microns thickness for the next five years before having to comply to the 30 micron standard.

Government also eased up on its stance on the banning of printed advertising on plastics bags. The initial proposal was that all printing on bags less than 80 microns thick would be banned, but the new agreement states that printing would be allowed on 25% of the surface area if the ink is not environmentally friendly. In situations where the ink used is acceptable this area can be increased to 50%.

Environmental Affairs and Tourism Minister Valli Moosa comments: "What we are able to show is that developing countries can take meaningful environmental measures in a manner that does not unreasonably prejudice any stakeholder in the society."