



## **Reducing Single-Use Plastic and Paper Bags in the Environment**

### **Fact Sheet**

#### **Single-use plastic and paper bags threaten San Francisco Bay and California coastal waters.**

- Plastic marine debris entangles, suffocates, and poisons at least 267 species worldwide, including sea turtles, birds, and marine mammals.<sup>1</sup>
- 1.37 million plastic bags were picked up by volunteers during the Ocean Conservancy's 2008 International Coastal Cleanup Day, second only in number to cigarette butts.<sup>2</sup>
- Californians use approximately 19 billion plastic bags and 5 billion paper bags annually.<sup>3</sup> Average use time of a plastic bag is 12 minutes.<sup>4</sup>
  - Bay Area residents use 3.8 billion plastic bags every year. It is estimated that one million end up in the Bay each year.
- According to the California Coastal Commission, up to 80 percent of all marine debris, and 90 percent of floating debris is plastic, which never biodegrades.<sup>5</sup>
- 12 million barrels of oil are used to produce 30 billion plastic bags in the United States every year.<sup>6</sup>
- Paper bags are not an environmentally sustainable solution: paper bag production in the U.S. consumes 14 billion trees per year.<sup>7</sup>

#### **Consumers are already paying the high costs of plastic bags.**

- Consumers are already paying for plastic bags through higher costs at retail stores, and higher recycling and garbage rates.
- California taxpayers spend \$25 million every year to collect and deposit plastic bags into landfills.<sup>8</sup>
- Last year, work stoppages caused by plastic bags jamming equipment at recycling centers cost the City of San Jose approximately \$1 million. In addition, the City of San Jose spends \$3 million per year on various litter abatement programs, not including volunteer hours, VTA and CalTrans costs.<sup>9</sup>
- The plastic bag industry collects \$4 billion per year in profits from U.S. retailers, who pass the costs to consumers.<sup>10</sup>

#### **Recycling bags has been ineffective.**

- Despite a 15-year effort to recycle plastic bags, less than five percent of all single-use plastic bags in California are actually recycled.<sup>11</sup>
- Recyclers report an approximate 17 cent handling fee per recycled plastic bag and extensive difficulty finding a market for used plastic.<sup>12</sup>

- Recycled plastic bags are low grade and bring a low price, partly because they get dirty during handling and transportation. Even the plastic bag industry doesn't use its own post-consumer material.<sup>13</sup>

## **Bag litter can be prevented by implementing fee or ban policy.**

- San Jose and many other California cities are analyzing the feasibility of issuing a 25 cent fee on single-use plastic and paper bags at major retail stores. In addition, two bills (AB 68 and AB 2449) that would require a 25 cent fee on single-use bags have been introduced in the California legislature.
- In Ireland, a 33 cent fee on plastic bags reduced their use by 90 percent and reduced plastic bag litter by 93 percent in one year.<sup>14</sup>
- Community input meetings in San Jose have shown the majority of residents support a single-use bag fee ordinance.<sup>15</sup>

## **In order to be effective at changing consumer habits, fees and bans must:**

- Ensure a switch to reusable cloth bags by placing a fee, ban or combination on both plastic and paper single-use bags.
- Provide consistency through broad coverage across all retail outlets, not just large groceries and pharmacies.
- Bring local partners and stakeholders into the policy process and discuss the advantages and cost savings to businesses and the community.
- Include a funding plan for publicity, enforcement and administrative activities.
  - Fee revenue can be used to recoup administration costs for municipalities and retailers, subsidize bags for low-income residents and clean up litter hot spots.<sup>16</sup>

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