



Myths vs. Facts Regarding Single Use Bag Bans and Fees

Myth: Recycling plastic bags is the best solution to addressing the litter problem.

Fact: Plastic bag recycling is costly and just doesn't work.

Despite a 15-year statewide effort in California, recycling plastic bags has failed. The California Integrated Waste Management Board estimates that less than 5 percent of all single use plastic bags in the state are actually recycled.¹ Plastic bags cost municipal recycling programs millions each year, when bags jam sorting equipment at recycling facilities. In San Jose, less than four percent of plastic bags are recycled and work stoppages from jammed bags cost the City approximately \$1 million per year.² Failed recycling efforts means billions of plastic bags are thrown away, blow onto our streets and float into our waterways. Plastic bags are the quintessential litter item: there are billions of them, they are used for a few short minutes, and they are light and easily transportable.

Myth: Recycled plastic bags are a valuable commodity.

Fact: The market for recycled plastic bags is small and unstable.

At the moment, a single manufacturer, purchases 70 percent of the plastic bags recovered nationwide, to make outdoor decking.³ In 2008, Newsweek reported that the company lost \$75 million in the previous year, raising questions about the long-term viability of the end market. Some curbside programs will take plastic bags if they are bundled, but the commodity is low grade and brings a low price, partly because it gets dirty during handling and transportation. Even the plastic bag industry doesn't use its own post-consumer material. Recyclers are sometimes forced to stockpile bales of bags or even pay to get rid of them.

Myth: Bans or fees on plastic bags will just push people to use more paper bags.

Fact: With well-designed policies that address both plastic and paper bags, consumers will switch to reusable cloth bags.

The legislation supported by Save The Bay and other advocates covers all single-use bags, both paper and plastic. This is a proven way to decrease the use of both kinds of bags in favor of reusable bags - which are inexpensive and long-lasting - ultimately saving retailers and consumers money. Every year in the U.S, consumers and retailers spend billions of dollars on excessive quantities of single-use bags that have an average use time of 12 minutes.⁴

Myth: A fee on plastic bags didn't work in Ireland.

Fact: Ireland's bag fee dramatically reduced plastic bag usage and plastic bag litter.

Ireland's Environmental Protection Agency submitted a letter to the San Jose City Council rebutting the American Chemistry Council's (ACC) false claims about Ireland's bag fee. In this letter, Ronan Mulhall of the Waste Policy division confirms that plastic bag litter dropped by 93 percent and plastic bag use decreased by approximately 90 percent in the year following the Plastic Bag Levy. Ireland later increased their fee to approximately 33 cents (US). The Irish EPA reports that these dramatically lower levels of plastic bag use and litter are being maintained.⁵

Myth: Fees on single use bags will negatively impact low income people.

Fact: No one has to pay the fee.

A single-use bag fee is only charged if you do not bring your own bag. Lower income communities (some of the most blighted by plastic bag litter) are already paying for plastic bags through city taxes and increased food and retail prices. Every bag fee policy currently under consideration at the local and state level would either subsidize reusable bags for low-income residents or exempt low-income residents from paying the fees.

SAVE THE BAY

Myth: Single-use bag bans or fees are bad policy in this time of economic crisis.

Fact: Reducing the use of single-use plastic and paper bags will save us all money.

Retailers currently embed 2 to 5 cents per plastic bag and 5 to 23 cents per paper bag in the price of goods—adding \$30 or more per person annually in hidden costs. In contrast, when consumers use reusable bags, retailers save money and can lower prices. Many grocers offer a 5-cent rebate for bringing your own bag, which can add up to about \$60 in savings per year for an average family.

Bags clog storm drains and recycling equipment, costing cities millions, and bag litter lowers property values and degrades recreational areas. In addition to the out-of-pocket cost passed on from the retailer to consumers, California taxpayers spend approximately \$25 million every year to collect and landfill plastic bags.⁶ San Jose City staff estimates that it costs at least \$3 million annually to clean plastic bags from creeks and clogged storm drains.⁷ Single-use bag production depletes resources and contributes to carbon emissions and global warming. We consume approximately 14 million trees⁸ and 12 million barrels of oil⁹ to produce the billions of plastic and paper bags we throw away in the United States every year.

Myth: Plastic bag litter isn't really a problem for the environment.

Fact: 1.37 million plastic bags were removed from coastal areas worldwide in one day last year.

Plastic trash entangles, suffocates, and poisons at least 267 animal species worldwide.¹⁰ According to the California Coastal Commission, up to 80 percent of all marine debris is plastic, which never biodegrades.¹¹ Plastic bags were the second largest item of litter picked up by volunteers during the Ocean Conservancy's 2008 International Coastal Cleanup Day.¹² It is estimated that one million plastic bags pollute the Bay every year. Scientists recently measured 334,271 pieces of plastic per square mile in the Great Pacific Garbage Patch.¹³

Myth: Education about responsible use and disposal of plastic bags will reduce litter.

Fact: Unfortunately, public education hasn't worked, despite massive public investment.

Huge amounts of money have been spent on public education about litter. One example is CalTrans' "Don't Trash California" campaign. Yet, we still see our highways coated in bags, cups, and cigarette butts. A fee on single use bags provides an incentive to consumers to change their behavior and switch to reusable bags.

###

1 California Integrated Waste Management Board www.ciwmb.ca.gov/lgcentral/basics/plasticbag.htm

2 Staff Report to City of San Jose Transportation and Environment Committee. February 2, 2009.

3 K. Bushnell, "Sustainable Consumption, Plastic Bags: What About Recycling Them?", Sierra Club, http://www.sierraclub.org/sustainable_consumption/articles/bags2.asp

4 "Fighting the Tide of Plastic Bags in a World Awash with Waste" <http://edition.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/asiapcf/07/13/eco.plasticbagwaste/index.html>

5 R. Mulhall 2009. Waste Policy: Prevention and recovery. Letter to the City of San Jose, Environmental Services Department.

6 California Integrated Waste Management Board www.ciwmb.ca.gov/lgcentral/basics/plasticbag.htm

7 Staff Report to City of San Jose Transportation and Environment Committee. February 2, 2009.

8 Thompson, Anne. (12/31/1969). "Paper or Plastic, What's the Greener Choice?" MSNBC <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/18538484/>.

9 Ned Potter, "Saving the World, One Plastic Bag at a Time", ABC News, <http://abcnews.go.com/Technology/Story?id=2935417&page=1>, (March 8, 2007)

10 Laist, D. W., 1997. Impacts of marine debris: entanglement of marine life in marine debris including a comprehensive list of species with entanglement and ingestion records. In: Coe, J. M. and D. B. Rogers (Eds.), Marine Debris -- Sources, Impacts and Solutions. Springer-Verlag, New York, pp. 99-139

11 M. Gordon 2006. Eliminating Land-based Discharges of Marine Debris in California: A Plan of Action from The Plastic Debris Project. Prepared for the California Coastal Commission.

12 "7M Pounds of Debris Collected in World's Waterways", Brian Skoloff, Associated Press, March 10, 2009

13 Moore, C. J., S. L. Moore, M. K. Leecaster, and S. B. Weisberg, 2001. A comparison of plastic and plankton in the North Pacific Central Gyre. In: Marine Pollution Bulletin 42, 1297-1300.