

Should the U.S. ban plastic grocery bags?

The city of San Francisco recently became the first American municipality to ban plastic bags from large stores. Under the legislation, large supermarkets and drugstores will not be allowed to offer plastic bags made from petroleum products.

Supporters of the law say the ban will save 450,000 gallons of oil a year and point out that many foreign cities and countries have already implemented similar legislation. Opponents argue that plastic bags are recyclable and economical, save trees and keep many thousands of Americans employed.

What do you think?



JUPITER IMAGES



Find out more about this topic on the Web:

- www.earthresource.org
- www.plasticbagrecycling.org
- www.sierraclub.org/bags/
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plastic_bags
- www.plasticbag.com

YES

from members:

Robert A. Downie
Harrisburg, PA



Unless there is a law passed where consumers must recycle. Too many plastic bags are ending up in landfills.

Miriam Peters
Wahiawa, HI



Disposal is a problem if plastic bags are not recycled properly.

Carol Kuntz
Prospect, KY



Paper is also recyclable and does not use oil. The U.S. needs to be less dependent on oil.

NO

from members:

Janet Gooding
Uniondale, NY



It is more convenient to carry plastic bags, and paper bags are not strong enough to carry the load.

Tae Kim
Port Orchard, WA



If we ban plastic bags more trees will get cut down to make paper. Plastic can be easily recycled.

Cheryl Desjardins
Albuquerque, NM



Plastic is recyclable and should be retained. Are our forests not a precious commodity? How long does it take to grow a tree?

from experts in the field:



Ross Mirkarimi, a San Francisco supervisor (www.sfgov.org/site/bdsupvrs), wrote the city's law banning plastic bags.

PLASTIC CHECKOUT BAGS are a costly problem. Each year in the United States, about 100 billion plastic bags are distributed by retail checkout counters. It takes approximately 35 million barrels of oil to produce them. Each year in San Francisco, 180 million bags (requiring about 650,000 gallons of oil) are distributed through large retailers. As a consequence, we spend more than \$8 million sweeping bags from our streets, untangling them from recycling sorting machinery,

scooping them out of our storm drains so our sewers don't back up and, ultimately, dumping them into the landfill. They contaminate landfills because they don't break down in the environment.

Education and recycling programs have failed. We've had drop-off programs for checkout bags at area supermarkets for more than 10 years, yet we collect less than 1 percent.

The ideal solution would be to charge a per-bag fee to cover the real costs of managing the waste stream. This approach was successful in Ireland, Bangladesh, Taiwan and Paris. However, San Francisco was prevented from doing this when the grocery lobby added a rider to an otherwise innocuous recycling bill that prohibited California cities from charging fees to recoup costs associated with plastic bags, or even asking grocery stores how many bags they use. We needed another solution, so we looked to our existing recycling programs.

San Francisco has the nation's largest food scrap collection program. Every day some 300 tons of leftovers from homes and businesses are collected and turned into compost, which is used on area farms. Even so, the single largest component of our landfill is food scraps that could have been composted. The most common reason residents give for not collecting food scraps is that it's messy. Under our new legislation, the "ick" factor is eliminated. Consumers will be able to neatly package their food leftovers into compostable bags and slip them into their green curbside compostable collection cart. The cost of the compostable bag—slightly more than a paper bag—will come down as this law proliferates.

San Francisco may have been the first American city to act on the problem, but we've heard from New York, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles and others. Local governments are beginning to realize they are subsidizing the production of waste because producers know that, no matter what they manufacture and distribute, local government—which means taxpayers—will foot the bill. That's unacceptable. [H]

from experts in the field:



Sharon Kneiss is vice president, products divisions, of the American Chemistry Council (www.americanchemistry.com).

FROM SHOPPING LISTS to checkout lines, more and more consumers are making choices with an eye toward the environment. But choosing the option that's best for the environment isn't always as easy we might think. Plastic shopping bags are a good example. Plastic shopping bags are resource efficient, reusable and 100 percent recyclable. Banning them misses the mark.

Recycling plastic bags is a robust and growing industry across the United States, and the number of programs that recycle plastic bags is increasing daily. Millions of pounds of plastic bags are recycled each year into durable outdoor decking, low-maintenance fencing and new bags, reducing the need to produce new materials. Measures that force retailers to replace recyclable plastic bags would severely diminish many of these programs.

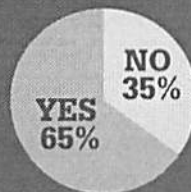
Reusing plastic bags is another form of recycling. Surveys show that more than 90 percent of Americans reuse their plastic bags as trash can liners, lunch bags and pet pickups. Every bag that is reused prevents consumers from having to purchase additional bags for these purposes.

Recyclable plastic bags are an extremely resource-efficient choice as they require 40 percent less energy to manufacture than paper bags and require 91 percent less energy to recycle pound for pound compared to paper. Additionally, the manufacture of paper bags produces 70 percent more air emissions than manufacturing plastic.

It's important to remember that paper and compostable plastic bags will degrade only in professionally managed, large-scale composting facilities. Less than 1 percent of the U.S. population has access to these facilities, so the majority of compostable and paper bags end up in a landfill, or as litter.

Everyone wants a clean environment. Education and awareness are the keys to successful litter prevention and increased recycling programs, not bans. Plastic bags are an essential product and an environmentally responsible choice. For our part, plastic makers will continue to work hand in hand with communities across the nation to educate consumers about proper waste disposal and ways to increase plastic recycling. [H]

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