



# Plastic Bags Are Too Valuable to Waste

By Shari M. Jackson

**P**lastic grocery bags have been at the center of debate across the country, with various state legislatures and local governments considering banning them or even imposing taxes on consumers who want to use them. While everyone shares the desire to reduce the waste and litter associated with plastic (and paper) bags, bans and taxes are not the solution to this problem. Recycling is a much more consumer-friendly answer that protects both the environment and the economy during the current recession.

Plastic shopping bags are fully recyclable. Educating and encouraging consumers to recycle them is the responsible way to decrease litter and—when compared with the alternatives—to conserve valuable resources and energy.

Many communities across the country are supporting this tried-and-true approach by rejecting taxes and bans and instead adopting the three Rs: reduce, reuse, and recycle. These common-sense, concrete steps can help keep our environment clean and minimize litter. And they're already working.

According to the recent National Post-Consumer Recycled Plastic Bag and Film Report, plastic film recovery (including both plastic bags and product wraps) has seen an overall increase of 27 percent since 2005. The same report found approximately 830 million pounds of post-consumer plastic bags and wraps were recovered in 2007.

Contrary to popular belief, banning recyclable plastic bags will not significantly reduce litter or the amount of waste in



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**An increasing number of grocery stores will not only provide plastic bags at checkout, but also accept returned bags for recycling.**

our sewers and landfills. Litter problems must be addressed directly by providing recycling and waste bins.

Banning a certain product will only cause a switch from one form of litter to another. There is no such thing as environmentally preferable litter, so such approaches merely create new problems.

This has been exemplified in the few communities that have already taxed or banned the use of plastic grocery bags, only to find their efforts to help the environment had the opposite effect.

For example, a ban on plastic grocery bags in San Francisco, Calif., caused shoppers to switch to paper bags, which in comparison to plastic bags require 70 percent more energy to manufacture, produce 50 percent more greenhouse gas emissions, and create five times more waste.

Bob Lilienfeld, Editor of the *Use Less Stuff Report*, conducted a study on the use of grocery bags in San Francisco following the city's bag ban. He found the replacement of plastic with paper bags and the return of

double-bagging may have actually increased the overall negative environmental impact.

Meanwhile, a before-and-after audit found litter in San Francisco had not decreased, which was one of the stated purposes of the city's ban.

A tax on grocery bags was imposed in Ireland in 2002—yet today, that country's consumers use 10 percent more plastic bags than in the pre-tax days.

There are simple steps everyone can take to make sure plastic bags don't end up as litter:

- Reduce—Shoppers can always decline a bag at checkout, e.g., when buying one pack of gum.
- Reuse—More than 90 percent of consumers reuse their plastic grocery bags at home for any number of purposes, from lunch bags to trash liners.
- Recycle—With growing consumer awareness and participation in local programs, more plastic bags and wrap material are being recycled.

### Ways to recycle

Many grocers and other retailers accept returned bags and wraps for recycling, ranging from grocery and dry cleaning bags to paper towel wraps and even the plastic bags in which newspapers are delivered.

Collecting plastic bags for recycling is easy to do: simply remove any handles, paper, or food, then neatly store all items in a recyclable bag until it's time to bring them back to the store.

Recycling is important not just for reducing litter, but also because plastic bags and wraps can be made into dozens of useful new products, such as fencing, decking, building and construction materials, shopping carts, and, of course, new bags.

Plastic bag manufacturers recently announced a landmark movement to dramatically increase recycling. The Full Circle Recycling Initiative sets an aggressive goal of 40 percent recycled content in all plastic bags by 2015, including at least 25 percent post-consumer recycled plastic. Each participant will separately decide how to support the goal, but overall, industry is expected to invest nearly \$50 million to overhaul manufacturing processes and will annually collect 470 million pounds of recycled plastic for the manufacturing of new bags.

This effort will reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 463 million pounds, conserve enough energy to heat 200,000 homes, and reduce waste by 300 million pounds every year. ●

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