

Plastic Bag Recycling Rate - A Non-Issue

HIGH SECONDARY USE OF PLASTIC BAGS INHIBITS RECYCLING RATES – A STORY BAG BANNERS WON'T TELL YOU!

By Anthony van Leeuwen, 23 November 2013

Bag Ban Proponents like to point out that the recycling rate for plastic carryout bags is 5% or less and that because of the low recycling rate, plastic carryout bags should be banned.

Bag Ban Proponents totally miss the point. When plastic carryout bags are reused as trash bags, waste can liners, to pick up pet litter, dispose of kitchen grease, dispose of dirty diapers, or the myriad of other uses and end up in the landfill filled with trash, they cannot be recycled. Bag Ban Proponents appear to have a particularly difficult time comprehending this simple fact.

According to the State of California, the recycling rate of plastic carryout bags through the **In Store Recycling Program** is less than 5%. (CalRecycle, 2011) The U. S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) reports that 14.1% of plastic bags (of all kinds) are recycled. (EPA Office of Solid Waste, 2013)

What Bag Ban Proponents **neglect** to tell you is that according to a study by the UK Environment Agency that 76% of all plastic carryout bags are reused by consumers for a variety of purposes. In fact, this same study reports that 40.3% of all plastic carryout bags are reused as waste bin liners, as trash bags, and to pick up pet litter. In addition, the study claims that reusing a plastic carryout bag as a trash bag is actually beneficial to the environment because it avoids the manufacture and purchase of another plastic bag. (Edwards & Fry, 2011)

In a similar 2007 study, performed by APCO Insight, it is reported that 92% of respondents said they reuse plastic carryout bags and 8% said they did not. Sixty-Five percent (65%) of the respondents used them for trash and the remainder used them for a variety of other purposes. (APCO Insight, 2007)

Both the UK study and the APCO Insight study identify high levels of secondary reuse of plastic carryout bags that would inhibit recycling rates for these bags, since most would end up in the landfill with trash!

In fact, the plastic carryout bag is one of the most repurposed and reused items that comes into the home. The fact that plastic carryout bags are used for 12 minutes to carry groceries home and then reused as a trash bag to dispose of trash is beneficial to the environment in that it prevents the purchase and manufacture of another plastic bag. (Edwards & Fry, 2011) By reusing plastic carryout bags a certain efficiency is attained that when broken results in a higher environmental cost! (van Leeuwen, 2013)

But getting back to that low 5% plastic bag recycling rate often quoted by bag ban proponents. The only thing lower is the recycling rate for reusable bags. **Yes, that is right and you heard it here!** The recycling rate for reusable bags is close to 0% or at most 1%. You won't hear a Bag Ban Proponent tell you that! Don't you think we should ban reusable bags as well?

You see, majority of reusable bags currently in use in California are made from non-woven Polypropylene (PP) or fabrics such as cotton. While PP is technically recyclable, currently there is no recycling infrastructure that will accept PP bags in the United States. Furthermore, although cotton bags are technically compostable, there is no composting facility currently available. Hence, both PP and cotton reusable bags must be disposed of in the trash or landfill. (Greene, 2011)

About 1% of reusable bags are made from High Density Polyethylene (HDPE) or Low Density Polyethylene (LDPE). These bags are recyclable via the In-Store Recycling Bin at your local retail store.

The real problem with the lightweight plastic carryout bags is the litter problem. Plastic bags that enter the environment as litter is a direct result of people who litter and from wind-blown trash coming from garbage and other trucks or more simply put the improper disposal of trash.

A caller to a local radio show made an interesting observation. He said that when people shop and use plastic carryout bags to bring their groceries home, the bags are not littered. The caller went on to explain, that when people go into a store to purchase food and drink that will be consumed somewhere outside the store, that the probability is very high that those plastic bags will end up as litter. A simple solution might be to provide a paper bag instead of a plastic bag to a person buying drinks and snacks?

A similar argument can be made for plastic carryout bags that are reused to pack clothes and food items for a trip to the beach or to the park. An empty bag that is disposed in a public trash receptacle could become windblown litter if not tied in a knot or weighed down with trash.

Shoppers who save plastic bags for reuse should be sure to recycle excess bags through the In-Store Recycling Bins at their local supermarket and not through the curbside recycling bins. If they do dispose of bags in the curbside trash bin, these bags along with paper litter that can become windblown should be bagged, similar to the requirement to bag shredded paper from a paper shredder! This solution will prevent a lot litter spilling from garbage trucks when containers are emptied thereby preventing a significant amount of roadside litter not to mention plastic bag litter.

While no one knows the proportion of plastic carryout bags used in the community that enter the environment as litter, we do know that plastic bags of all types comprise less than 0.6% of roadside litter! (Stein, 2012) Using a bag ban to control littered plastic bags is the wrong solution, cost local jurisdictions and community residents millions of dollars for **negligible results**. (van Leeuwen, 2013)

Conclusion

Plastic bag bans are **BAD** public policy. When Bag Ban Proponents talk about the low 5% plastic bag recycling rate without explaining that the low recycling rate is a direct result of the high secondary reuse rate of plastic carryout bags by shoppers, you know they are trying to pull the wool over your eyes!

About The Author

Anthony van Leeuwen is the founder of the [Fight The Plastic Bag Ban](http://fighttheplasticbagban.com) website and writes extensively on the subject. He holds a bachelors and Master's degree in Electronics Engineering and has over 40 years of experience working in the federal government.

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