

TOP 10 MYTHS ABOUT PLASTIC GROCERY BAGS

Myth #1: Plastic bag bans are spreading like wildfire across the country.

Fact: No. In fact, plastic bags have not been banned anywhere, not even in San Francisco. San Francisco is requiring that consumers use compostable plastic bags instead of 100% recyclable bags. Contrary to popular belief, there is a growing movement to increase access to recycle plastic bags – not eliminate them. New Jersey, Connecticut, and cities in California have all taken recent action to table legislation that would ban certain types of plastic bags and instead are now looking to implement plastic bag recycling programs.

Myth #2: Paper grocery bags are a better environmental choice than plastic bags.

Fact: Plastic bags are 100% recyclable and for all environmental impacts related to air emissions, water emissions and solid waste – those of paper bags are significantly greater than that of plastic grocery bags:

- Plastic bags use 40% less energy to produce and generate 80% less solid waste than paper¹
- Paper bags generate 70% more emissions, and 50 times more water pollutants than plastic bags.²
- Even paper bags made from 100% recycled fiber use more fossil fuels than plastic bags³

Myth #3: Plastic bags are the largest component of landfills and the primary component of litter.

Fact: The item most frequently encountered in landfills is paper—on average, it accounts for more than 40% of a landfill's contents.⁴ Newspapers alone take up as much as 13% of landfill space.⁵

Cigarette butts, chewing gum, and candy wrappers account for about 95% of all litter in the English-speaking world.⁶ Education, as well as responsible use and disposal of all materials and products, is the key to reducing litter.

Myth #4: Plastic grocery bags take 1,000 years to decompose in landfills.

Fact: Virtually nothing – not paper, food, plastic or even compostable or bio degradable products – decompose in today's landfills, because they are actually designed to be as stable and dry as possible. Research by William Rathje, who runs the Garbage Project, has shown that when excavated from a landfill, newspapers from the 1960s can be intact and readable.

Myth #5: Plastic bags feed America's addiction to oil.

Fact: Plastic bags are extraordinarily energy-efficient to manufacture. Less than .05% of a barrel of oil goes into making all the plastic bags used in the US while 93% - 95% of every barrel of crude oil is burned for fuel and heating purposes.⁷ Although they are made from natural gas or oil, plastic bags actually consume less fossil fuels during their lifetime than do compostable plastic and paper bags.⁸

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Myth #6: Compostable bags can degrade in backyard composts.

Fact: In order to breakdown, compostable bags must be sent to an industrial composting facility, not backyard piles or municipal composting centers. There are very few of these facilities in the U.S. and where these facilities are not available, compostable bags will sit in landfills because they can't be recycled.

Myth #7: For people who live near water, paper bags are the environmentally friendly choice to protect marine wildlife.

Fact: Since paper bag production has more negative environmental impacts related to air emissions, water emissions and solid waste than plastic grocery bags, they're not a solution. Recycling and proper disposal of all products would make sure that any threat to the environment, including wildlife, would be reduced.

Myth #8: Low recycling rates for plastic bags prove recycling them doesn't work.

Fact: Recycling does work. The problem is not everyone knows that plastic grocery bags are 100% recyclable and not everyone has access to plastic bag recycling in their community. A national at-store plastic bag recycling program would bring the recycling solution to everyone and increase rates. One Southern supermarket chain has such a program, and recycles more than 20% of the volume of plastic bags that it provides to customers.

Myth #9: Recycling plastic bags is too expensive.

Fact: The price of not recycling them is high. Recycling can help save resources and minimize the amount of waste going to landfills. Also, recycling helps reduce litter, as bags are contained and stored. Its worth noting that it takes 91% less energy to recycle a pound of plastic than it takes to recycle a pound of paper.⁹

Myth #10: There's no demand for recycled plastic.

Fact: Today there is a growing market for recycled plastic that didn't exist 15 years ago. It's also cheaper now to use recycled plastic than to obtain new materials, increasing potential for more recycling of used plastic bags. Recycled plastic grocery and shopping bags are currently being made into new consumer products such as clean new plastic shopping bags, outdoor decking and railing products.

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¹ U.S. EPA website, (www.epa.gov/region1/communities/shopbags.html)

² Ibid

³ REPA of Polyethylene and Unbleached Paper Grocery Sacks, Prepared for the Solid Waste Council, Franklin Associates Report, June 1990

⁴ U.S. EPA website, (www.epa.gov/msw/paper.htm)

⁵ U.S. EPA website, (<http://www.epa.gov/msw/faq.htm>)

⁶ *Litter Composition Survey of England*, October 2004, produced by ENCAMS for INCPEN www.incpen.org/pages/userdata/incp/LitterCompSurvey24Jan2005.pdf.

⁷ Chemical Market Associates, Inc.

⁸ Évaluation des impacts environnementaux des sacs de caisse Carrefour (Evaluation of the Environmental Impact of Carrefour Merchandise Bags), Prepared by Price-Waterhouse-Coopers/Ecobilan (EcoBalance), February 2004, #300940BE8, (www.ademe.fr/htdocs/actualite/rapport_carrefour_post_revue_critique_v4.pdf).

⁹ U.S. EPA website, (www.epa.gov/region1/communities/shopbags.html)