

# FAQ's About Plastic Grocery Bags

## Why is Heal the Bay concerned about plastic grocery bags?

- Besides fouling our public spaces with unsightly debris, plastic bags easily find their way to the marine environment through the storm drain system.
- Plastic bags kill sea animals that mistake them for food or become entangled in them.<sup>1</sup>
- Some areas of the Pacific Ocean contain six times more plastic debris than zooplankton (the fundamental base of our food chain.) These tiny pieces of plastic are eaten by zooplankton and move up the food chain, potentially presenting health risks for humans.<sup>2</sup>
- Plastic bags don't biodegrade, they photo degrade. The bags break down into smaller and smaller pieces of plastic, but never go away.<sup>3</sup>
- See Heal the Bay's *Pacific Protection Initiative* website for more information: [www.Healthebay.org/PPI](http://www.Healthebay.org/PPI)

## How big a problem are plastic grocery bags?

- Californians use more than 19 billion plastic grocery bags and merchandise bags each year, roughly 552 bags per person. This usage generates 147,038 tons of unnecessary waste — enough to stretch around the globe over 250 times.
- Californians throw away over 600 plastic bags per second.<sup>4</sup>
- California taxpayers spend \$25 million to collect and landfill plastic bag waste each year. That figure does not include external costs, e.g., resource extraction and depletion, quality of life issues, economic loss due to plastic bag litter and human health expenses.<sup>5</sup>
- U.S. consumers use 100 billion plastic bags annually, which is the energy equivalent of 12 million barrels of oil.<sup>6</sup>

## Is reusing plastic grocery bags the answer?

- No. While some people reuse their bags for cleaning up dog waste and as trash can liners, the overwhelming majority of people do not.
- It's a misperception that you are getting a free bag for these second conveniences. Nothing is really free. You are paying for that bag -- it's just hidden in other costs and impacts to the environment.
- Disposable bags cost our cities up to 17 cents per bag for disposal. And by our cities, we mean you, the taxpayer.<sup>7</sup>

## Is recycling plastic bags the answer?

- No. Plastic grocery bags are rarely recycled. Currently, less than 5% of plastic bags are recycled.<sup>8</sup>
- The saying goes, "Reduce. Reuse. Recycle." We should reduce our usage first, reuse materials for as long as possible and only then should we recycle it.
- Some argue that plastic recycling is not an efficient use of our precious energy resources.
- The focus on recycling encourages over-consumption to some degree. It allows us to think that we can throw away goods because they are recyclable.

## Is using a paper grocery bag the answer?

- No. The best choice is to always use a reusable bag. During manufacturing, both paper and plastic bags emit global warming gases; create water pollution and use raw materials and energy.<sup>9</sup>
- Each high quality reusable bag can eliminate hundreds to thousands of plastic bags over its lifetime.
- Although most people are aware that paper bags are recyclable, only about 20% of them are actually recycled.

## What kind of reusable bag should I use?

- There are sources for reusable bags made from organic cotton, hemp and polypropylene, all made in the United States.
- A reusable grocery bag made from recycled plastic is not necessarily better than using a reusable bag made from virgin plastic. For instance, the recycling process typically involves transportation of the discarded goods from the U.S. to Asia where environmental regulations aren't as stringent. The raw materials are reprocessed to make the new material, which is shipped back to the U. S. for assembly and transport to a retailer. This entire journey uses petroleum resources and creates harmful emissions.<sup>10</sup>
- Under a recent state law, grocery stores are required to sell reusable bags for a nominal fee.<sup>11</sup>

## How can I remember to bring bags to the store?

- Always start your grocery list with "Bring Bags."
- Keep a collapsible bag in your purse or briefcase for those emergency runs to the stores.
- Keep your bags in your car trunk.

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- <sup>1</sup> N. Wallace. "Debris entanglement in the marine environment: A review" ( 985) pp. 259-277 in: R.S. Shomura and H.O. Yoshida (eds.), Proceedings of the Workshop on the Fate and Impact of Marine Debris, U.S. Department of Commerce, NOAA Technical Memorandum. NMFS, NOAA-TM-NMFS-SWFC-5.
- <sup>2</sup> C.J. Moore et al., (2001) "A Comparison of Plastic and Plankton in the Pacific Central Gyre," Marine Pollution Bulletin 42: 297-1300; 11US Commission on Ocean Policy, *An Ocean Blueprint for the 21st Century*. Final Report. Washington, DC, 2004 ISBN#0-9759462-0-X..102006 PPIC Poll data;
- <sup>3</sup> California Coastal Commission, (2006) "Eliminating Land-based Discharges of Marine Debris in California: A Plan of Action from The Plastic Debris Project;"
- <sup>4</sup> California Integrated Waste Management Board, <http://www.ciwmb.ca.gov/lgcentral/basics/plasticbag.htm>
- <sup>5</sup> Californians Against Waste, [http://www.cawrecycles.org/plastic\\_campaign/plastic\\_bags/problem](http://www.cawrecycles.org/plastic_campaign/plastic_bags/problem)
- <sup>6</sup> 1 Bag at a Time, [http://www.1bagatime.com/index.php?page=misc&section=problem\\_1](http://www.1bagatime.com/index.php?page=misc&section=problem_1)
- <sup>7</sup> Californians Against Waste, [http://www.cawrecycles.org/plastic\\_campaign/plastic\\_bags/problem](http://www.cawrecycles.org/plastic_campaign/plastic_bags/problem)
- <sup>8</sup> US EPA 2005 Characterization of Municipal Solid Waste, Table 4.
- <sup>9</sup> 1 Bag at a Time, [http://www.1bagatime.com/index.php?page=misc&section=problem\\_5](http://www.1bagatime.com/index.php?page=misc&section=problem_5)
- <sup>10</sup> 1 Bag at a Time, [http://www.1bagatime.com/index.php?page=misc&section=problem\\_7](http://www.1bagatime.com/index.php?page=misc&section=problem_7)
- <sup>11</sup> California Integrated Waste Management Board, <http://www.ciwmb.ca.gov/lgcentral/basics/plasticbag.htm>