



Info Sheet

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RECYCLABLE PLASTIC BAGS

Plastic grocery bags are an extremely resource-efficient disposable bag choice.

- Plastic grocery bags require 70 percent less energy to manufacture than paper bags.¹
- For every seven trucks needed to deliver paper bags, only one truck is needed for the same number of plastic bags, helping to save energy and reduce emissions.
- It takes 91% less energy to recycle a pound of plastic than it takes to recycle a pound of paper.²

Less material means less waste and fewer emissions.

- 2,000 plastic bags weigh 30 lbs; 2,000 paper bags weigh 280 lbs. Plastic bags take up a lot less space in a landfill.²
- Plastic bags generate 80 percent less waste than paper bags.²
- Plastic grocery and retail bags make up a tiny fraction (less than 0.5 percent) of the U.S. municipal solid waste stream.³
- Plastic bags generate only 50% of the greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions of composted paper bags.¹
- The production of plastic bags consumes less than 6 percent of the water needed to make paper bags.¹

Plastic grocery bags are fully recyclable⁴ and the number of recycling programs is increasing daily.

- Nationwide over 830 million pounds of bags and film were recycled in 2007 – up 27 percent from 2005.⁵
- According to EPA's data, about 12 percent of plastic bags and film were recycled in 2007.³
- Plastic bags can be made into dozens of useful new products, such as building and construction products, low-maintenance fencing and decking, and of course, new bags.
- There is high demand for this material, and in most areas, demand exceeds the available supply because many consumers are not aware that collection programs are available at local stores.
- In recent years, many grocers and retailers have introduced plastic bag collection programs. Consumers should look for a collection bin, usually located at the front of the store. The number of municipal drop-off centers and curbside programs to recycle plastic bags is increasing also. Consumers can locate plastic bag recycling programs in their communities by visiting www.PlasticBagRecycling.org.
- In addition to grocery bags, other plastic retail bags, dry cleaning bags, newspaper bags, plastic wrap from products like paper towels and toilet paper, and all bags labeled with recycling codes #2 (HDPE) and #4 (LLDPE) can be included wherever plastic bags are collected for recycling.

¹ Boustead Consulting & Associates Ltd. *Life Cycle Assessment for Three Types of Grocery Bags – Recyclable Plastic; Compostable, Biodegradable Plastic; and Recycled, Recyclable Paper*. 2007. See: http://www.americanchemistry.com/s_plastics/doc.asp?CID=1106&DID=7212

² U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. *Questions about Your Community Shopping Bags: Paper or Plastic*. See: <http://web.archive.org/web/20060426235724/http://www.epa.gov/region1/communities/shopbags.html>

³ U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. *Municipal Waste in the United States: 2007 Facts and Figures* (p. 52, Table 7). See: <http://www.epa.gov/osw/nonhaz/municipal/pubs/msw07-rpt.pdf>

⁴ Recycling may not be available in all areas. Check to see if plastic bag recycling exists in your community. See: <http://www.plasticbagrecycling.org/01.0/>

⁵ Moore Recycling Associates, Inc. *2007 National Post-Consumer Recycled Plastic Bag and Film Report*. Sonoma, California. 2009. See: http://www.americanchemistry.com/s_plastics/sec_content.asp?CID=1593&DID=8899

In addition to recycling, a recent national survey shows that over 90% of Americans reuse their plastic bags.

- About 65% of Americans reuse their bags for trash disposal. Other common uses include lunch bags and pet pick-up.
- In this regard, the reuse of a plastic shopping bag prevents a second bag from being purchased to fulfill these necessary functions.

WHAT TO KNOW ABOUT BAG BANS

Banning recyclable plastic bags will not reduce society's dependence on oil.

- In the United States, nearly 80% of polyethylene⁶, the type of plastic used to make plastic bags, is produced from natural gas, *not* oil. This includes feedstock, process and transportation energy.
- Much of the energy used to make plastic bags is embodied in the bag itself, and since plastic bags are fully recyclable, that energy is available for new products.

Mandating that recyclable plastic bags be replaced with biodegradable or compostable bags will not reduce litter or the amount of waste in our landfills.

- The biodegradable and compostable bags currently on the market will only degrade in a professionally-managed, large-scale composting facility. They will not breakdown in the natural environment, in a home composting device or in a landfill.
- It is currently estimated that there are fewer than 100 suitable composting facilities in the United States. Where composting facilities are not available, "compostable" bags will be sent to a landfill.

Banning recyclable plastic bags or mandating their replacement with compostable bags will diminish efforts to recycle these products.

- Mandating that grocers and retailers replace plastic bags with compostable or paper bags will eliminate many in-store collection programs, which are currently the largest mechanism for recovering post-consumer bags for recycling.
- In addition, the mandated use of compostable bags will cause the accidental commingling of biodegradable and recyclable bags, which will contaminate the recovered material, rendering it unusable by manufacturers.

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⁶ U.S. Department of Energy's and National Renewable Energy Laboratory's U.S. Life Cycle Inventory Database. See: <http://www.nrel.gov/lci/> Data also available as a report: Franklin Associates, LLC. *Cradle-to-Gate Life Cycle Inventory of Nine Plastic Resins and Two Polyurethane Precursors*. 2007. See: http://www.americanchemistry.com/s_plastics/sec_content.asp?CID=1930&DID=7832

