

# Call to ban plastic bags is government interference at its worse

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If the best-known law of physics is “for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction,” then surely the best-known law of politics is “for every government action there is an unintended reaction.”

Whenever government rushes to pass feel-good regulations designed to manipulate Americans’ behavior, unintended consequences are sure to follow. Consider the recent push across the country to pass laws banning or taxing plastic bags (some stores are even bilking consumers by charging a fee for paper bags and pocketing the profit). Recent efforts in L.A. County, San Jose, Oregon and Washington, D.C., illustrate that this isn’t a fad, but a trend that other towns will likely follow. We are told it is important to “Ban the Bag” because plastic bags pose a menace to the environment and require fossil fuels to produce.

When laws like this are passed, consumers are forced to pack reusable bags with them when they visit supermarkets and other retailers. Unfortunately, it turns out that some of these reusable bags — the ones replacing recyclable plastic or paper ones — are laced with excessive levels of lead and can harbor dangerous bacteria. Most of us are in the dark about it.

A new poll conducted by the Opinion Research Corporation found that 56 percent of Americans are “not at all aware” that their reusable bags can contain harmful chemicals and bacteria.

Most reusable bags sold or given away by U.S. stores are imported from China, and quite a few contain levels of lead above what is legally allowable in many states. Sen. Charles Schumer, D-N.Y., has called on federal and state regulatory agencies including the Food and Drug Administration, Consumer Product Safety Commission and the Environmental Protection Agency to investigate a report that showed nearly half of all reusable bags exceed state laws covering toxins in packaging.

Sen. Schumer sounded alarm bells when he said, “When our families go to the grocery store looking for safe and healthy foods to feed their kids, the last thing they should have to worry about are toxic bags.”

Yikes.

Lead isn’t the only issue with reusable bags. According to a recent study from the University of Arizona, scientists “found large numbers of bacteria in almost all the bags” they surveyed. Researchers wrote that “(fecal) coliform bacteria was found in half the bags, and E. coli was in 12 percent of the bags.”

This is especially gross when you consider that (again, according to an Opinion Research Corporation poll) 68 percent of Americans have washed their reusable bags only once (at most) in the last year. Many have never washed them at all.

Making one of these reusable bags requires the same amount of energy it takes to produce 28 plastic bags. If every reusable bag were actually being used over and over again, of course, that wouldn’t be a big deal. Unfortunately, that’s not the case.

One poll in San Francisco, where plastic bags are banned, found that 58 percent of shoppers forget to take reusable totes to the grocery store. Another study from the California State University Chico Research Foundation observed that only 10 percent of shoppers use reusable bags, while a national survey found that only 14 percent of Americans who have reusable bags use them all the time. As a result, unused “reusable” bags can actually have a much larger carbon footprint than the disposable (but recyclable) bags they replaced.

These are all unintended consequences.

As a professional advocate for consumer freedom, I see it happen all the time. Well-intentioned politicians often respond to activist-driven junk science by demonizing, banning, or taxing products without giving any thought to what people will use instead. In the end, the new alternative can end up being worse.

When you tax soda, people drink nonsoda beverages that can contain more calories. When you restrict salt levels in prepared foods, people over-salt the bland result. When butter was demonized in the ‘90s, food companies switched to trans fats like

margarine as a “healthier” alternative. And when you ban and tax recyclable plastic shopping bags, people switch to Chinese-manufactured reusable bags that contain excessive levels of lead and bacteria.

The only way to avoid these unintended consequences is to let consumers — rather than regulators or lawmakers — decide for themselves. Bagging excessive regulations would be a good start.

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