

The Big Issue: Plastic Bags

by [Jennifer Berry](#)

Over the past year, the buzz about paper, [plastic](#) and [reusable bags](#) has grown louder by the day.

In the last two years, four states – [California](#), [New York](#), Rhode Island and [Delaware](#); five cities – Tucson, Chicago, New York City, San Juan Capistrano, Calif. and Red Bank, N.J.; and five counties in New York – Albany, Nassau, Rockland, Suffolk and Westchester, have enacted mandatory [plastic bag](#) recycling.

In the meantime, San Francisco and [San Jose](#) have enacted their own bag bans, and Florida is considering [similar legislation](#) for both paper and plastic.



Plastic bag production uses less than 4 percent of the water needed to make paper bags. Photo: Amanda Wills, Earth911.com

But what's the big deal? Why do people care so much about what bags they use, especially when it comes to plastic versions? We're going to get down to the bottom of the plastic bag, and you may be surprised about what we've dug up.

The Issues

Recently, a topic of major debate that's put plastic bags in the spotlight is the discovery of the giant, floating masses of trash and plastic in the world's oceans. Located in the North Pacific Ocean, one of these masses is said to be [twice the size of Texas](#) and has probably developed over the past 30 years.

Adding to this dilemma, scientists recently discovered that, contrary to previous belief, [plastics break down quickly](#) and in low temperatures in the ocean.

“We found that plastic in the ocean actually decomposes as it is exposed to the rain and sun and other environmental conditions, giving rise to yet another source of global contamination that will continue into the future,” said Katsuhiko Saido, lead author of the study that discovered this information, tells [BBC News](#).

But how did all this trash make it to our oceans? Among many issues, littering and lack of awareness about recycling are major causes of concern.

The Hard Facts

Let's admit it, if it came down to choosing paper versus plastic bags at the checkout line, most people would choose paper. After all, they're made from a renewable resource and are typically pretty easy to recycle. But when you consider the overall life cycle impact of paper bags over plastic, paper doesn't look quite as green:

- Each year, Americans use about 10 billion paper bags, resulting in the cutting down of 14 million trees.
- Using paper bags doubles the amount of CO2 produced versus using plastic bags.
- Plastic grocery bags require 40-70 percent less energy to manufacture than paper bags.
- It takes 91 percent less energy to recycle a pound of plastic than it takes to recycle a pound of paper.
- In the U.S. nearly 80 percent of polyethylene (the plastic used for bags) is produced from natural gas. This includes feedstock, process and transportation energy.

According to Keith Christman, senior director of market advocacy for the American Chemistry Council (ACC), plastic bags may actually be the better choice.

"They reduce greenhouse gas emissions [...] they use half the emissions and use half the energy and create 80 percent less waste than paper bags," he told Earth911.

But why do bags have such a lower environmental footprint in manufacturing? According to Christman, one of the factors that accounts for this is the difference in weight between a typical paper and plastic bag, with paper bags weighing 10 times as much as their plastic counterparts on average.

"That goes along with the fundamental law of reducing – using much less material in the first place," he said.

What Now?

Ways to reduce your impact when it comes to plastic bags are both simple and accessible.

1. Reduce Your Use

When it comes to disposable bags in general, it's a good idea to evaluate when you really need one. An example of this is to adhere to "proper bagging techniques," as Christman refers to them. This includes maximizing the products in your bags or avoiding bag use for only a few items. "If you only have one item at the store, for example, you really don't need a bag," he said.

Additionally, using [reusable bags](#) is a great choice. Always think "quality over quantity" and go for sturdy bags that were made with recycled or organic materials.

2. Reuse What You Can

Since a typical plastic bag weighs approximately 4 to 5 grams and can hold up to 17 pounds of product – nearly 2,000 times its own weight – they can usually withstand a few rounds of use.

If you don't want to buy reusable bags, taking your plastic bags back to the store for a few more trips is a great option. Additionally, there are a number of wonderful [craft ideas](#) for plastic bag reuse, including messenger bags and even art.

3. Recycle the Rest

Even though one little, insignificant plastic bag doesn't seem like a big deal to toss in the trash, the cumulative effects of all this waste far outweigh the convenience of not having to stockpile your bags for your next trip to the grocery store.

For example, according to ZeroWaste California, it costs the state \$25 million annually to landfill discarded plastic bags. And because plastic bags are not typically accepted in your curbside bin, they seem more difficult to recycle than their paper counterparts.

However, according to the ACC, [retail stores](#) with plastic bag collection programs are located in every U.S. state. Earth911 also lists [thousands of locations](#) to recycle plastic bags across the country. Most locations offer the option to recycle other types of plastic bags, such as:



About 89 billion plastic bags, sacks and wraps are used each year in the U.S. Photo: Amanda Wills, Earth911.com

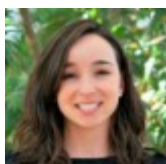
- Newspaper bags
- Dry cleaning bags
- Bread bags
- Produce bags
- Toilet paper, napkin and paper towel wraps
- Furniture wrap
- Electronic wrap
- Plastic retail bags (hard plastic and string handles removed)
- Zip lock bags (remove the “zippers”)
- Plastic cereal box liners (if it tears like paper, do not include)
- Diaper wrap (packaging)
- Plastic shipping envelopes (no bubble wrap and be sure to remove any labels)
- Case wrap (e.g., snacks, water bottles)
- All clean, dry bags labeled #2 or #4

When you take your bags for recycling, it's important to note that you should remove all receipts and make sure the bags are clean and dry.

What's Next

One of the best aspects of recycling plastic bags and film is what these material will do in their next product life cycles. A primary usage of plastic bags and film is in composite lumber, which accounts for almost 37 percent of the recycled product market.

Recycled plastic can also become a number of other products. According to the ACC's "[Too Valuable To Waste](#)" Web site, "While litter doesn't belong swimming in the sea, it also doesn't always belong in the trash bin. Plastic bottles and other plastic containers are among the most easily recyclable materials, and can go on to live a very useful second life as decking, carpet or polar fleece, just to name a few."



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