

Popularity not in the bag

Recycling of plastic sacks gains momentum, but some question whether it will catch on, and others doubt its environmental effectiveness

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The bag wars of the 1980s are over, paper grocery sacks beaten to a pulp by their upstart plastic cousins.

But concern over litter and environmental harm from the fluttery, ubiquitous bags has hatched a new recycling movement. In recent months, Suffolk, New York City and Westchester have all passed voluntary plastic bag recycling measures. Nassau is considering its own version and earlier this month the New York State Assembly passed a similar law. The State Senate has yet to vote on the measure.

Touted as a way to boost recycling in the absence of curbside bag collection, the measures mirror those already adopted by many grocery chains.

Still, little solid evidence exists to show those programs actually work. One analysis found that in 2006 consumers recycled only about 2 percent of plastic grocery bags.

Assemb. Steve Englebright (D-Setauket), who has worked extensively on trash and recycling issues, said the local legislative push "kind of misses the point. You shouldn't be using plastic bags so profusely anyhow."

Setting out bins

Backed by the plastics industry and endorsed by many environmental advocates, the recycling laws place no limit on the numbers of bags stores dispense.

Instead, big grocery and chain stores must set out bins where shoppers can return used bags - Suffolk's bill limits it to plastic carryout bags, while a draft of Nassau's version also allows newspaper and dry-cleaning bags. The returned sacks are made into composite lumber or, less often, new bags. In some cases, retailers must also offer reusable bags for sale.

Some environmental advocates cast the recycling laws as a consciousness-raising way station that will lead to the eventual replacement of disposable bags with reusable cloth or nylon totes.

"We see these laws as the beginning, not the end," said Adrienne Esposito of Citizens Campaign for the Environment.

It's unclear how voluntary measures that rely on conscientious shoppers would reduce litter tossed by those who presumably care little for the environment.

"When people recycle, they recognize a material has value and are, we believe, less likely to litter," said Keith Christman of the plastic bag industry group Progressive Bag Affiliates.

Nassau Legis. David Denenberg (D-Merrick) said he wants to add a provision to the proposed Nassau law that would require stores to keep their parking lots free of litter. A public hearing on the proposed law is scheduled today.

Proponents say they expect plastic bag recycling to increase under the laws, and that banning bags would dismantle the bag recycling infrastructure before it has a chance to prove itself.

Feel good about green

"I think that this is an easy method that people can use to go green and feel good about themselves," said Suffolk Legis. Wayne Horsley (D-Babylon), sponsor of the county bill.

But others wonder whether the voluntary programs are just that: feel-good measures that do little to reduce the problem of plastic sacks that blow into trees, clog storm drains and choke marine animals.

San Francisco, which banned nonbiodegradable bags last year, had voluntary recycling in place for decades, said Mark Westlund, spokesman for the city's Department of the Environment. "We found we were getting about a 1 percent recycling rate, which means that the program is about a 99 percent failure," he said.

Bag bans and taxes like the one Ireland has on plastic bags have been resisted by industry groups, which say they unfairly favor paper over plastic.

"There is just no compelling reason to prefer one over the other," said Patricia Broadhagen of the Food Industry Alliance of New York State, a supermarket trade association. "What we should promote is ... reusing the bags we do have, and recycling the ones we can."

What's the incentive?

Stores such as Stop & Shop and Wal-Mart already have voluntary bag recycling programs on Long Island. Pathmark and Waldbaum's offer rebates to shoppers who reuse plastic bags or bring their own totes. Many stores also sell reusable bags.

Still, on a recent evening, the dominant sound from checkout lines at the Dix Hills Super Stop & Shop was the swish of groceries being plunked into plastic bags. Some shoppers said recycling was a good idea, but doubted people would do it.

"There is really no incentive for bringing back the bags," said Mike McGuire of Huntington, after he redeemed two sacks of plastic soda bottles for their deposits at the store's bottle room.

Outside the Wal-Mart in Westbury, shoppers said they were unaware of the store's collection program - despite having just walked past the recycling bins.

Colleen Camogolino, Stop & Shop regional service manager, said "certain areas" - Miller Place, Northport and West Babylon - "are better at recycling than others." A company spokesman said exact figures were not available to track the local recycling rate.

Used bags returned to Stop & Shop's Long Island stores get trucked back to regional warehouses. The bags are bundled together with plastic film from shipping pallets, and sold to a company in Arkansas that makes plastic lumber.

Such products are about 50 percent wood and 50 percent plastic, according to a Virginia manufacturer, Trex. One 16-foot 5-by-4 board contains 1,278 bags.

But will it work?

In-store recycling programs are one way for the plastics industry to take more responsibility for its products than previously, said Ken Trottere, vice president of Poly-Pak Industries in Melville.

But will the programs work?

"That's the \$64,000 question," said Trottere, whose company sells disposable and reusable bags, and a recycling system that outfits retailers with bins and signs. "What is the average grocery shopper going to do? Are they going to inconvenience themselves, collect the bags and take them back to the mall?"

The American Chemistry Council, an industry group that represents plastics and chemical companies, estimates 812 million pounds of plastic film and plastic bags were recycled nationwide in 2006. The council does not calculate the rate of consumer recycling, citing the difficulty of reconciling national sales data with the volume of material that enters or exists in the country.

The council disputes an analysis by Plastic News of the 2006 report that estimated consumer plastic bag recycling rates were just above 2 percent.

Christman of Progressive Bag Affiliates said it was difficult to separate grocery bags out from plastic film because the two are recycled together.

Christman said figures from a 2006 federal Environmental Protection Agency report reflect a more accurate picture of the recycling rate - 9.8 percent for the two types of plastic combined. That same year, Americans recycled 30 percent of their plastic bottles and more than 51 percent of paper and cardboard.

Ulterior motives

Eric Goldstein, a senior attorney with the Natural Resources Defense Council, supports the voluntary recycling laws but acknowledged that some backers have ulterior motives.

"I don't think it's a secret that some industry groups use voluntary recycling programs as a way of dissipating energy for more vigorous efforts to combat waste and litter," Goldstein said.

Still, he said the programs are a way to educate consumers without engendering the kind of political blowback that two decades ago doomed a more sweeping packaging ban Englebright had sponsored when he was a Suffolk County legislator. "If they are not successful in dramatically cutting plastic bag use, they are likely to be followed by more aggressive measures, such as the surcharges," Goldstein said.

One retailer with a big local presence is eliminating the bags altogether: In October, IKEA will offer only reusable bags, for 59 cents. The Swedish furniture giant began charging for disposable bags here last year, reducing use by 92 percent.

PAPER

Trees are a renewable resource, although cutting them down removes a carbon sink that can absorb greenhouse gases.

Pulping wood and making paper produce air and water pollutants.

Most municipal recycling programs accept paper, which had a more than 50 percent recovery rate in 2006.

Paper bags work well with composting programs because they break down in about a month in open air.

PLASTIC

Once depleted to make plastic bags, fossil fuels such as crude oil and gas cannot be replaced.

Plastic bags weigh less than paper, so they take up less room in landfills and moving them requires less fuel.

It takes more energy to recycle a pound of paper than a pound of plastic.

Estimates vary, but only a fraction (between 1 to 5 percent) of plastic bags are currently recycled.

REUSABLE

The environmental footprint of one cloth or durable synthetic bag diminishes over time.

After 11 uses, one reusable bag has a lower environmental impact than using 11 disposable plastic bags.

Reducing the number of disposable grocery bags cuts down on waste and saves trees and energy.

Source: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency