

Viewpoints: Recycling Plastic Bags – not banning them is the answer

If you are environmentally conscious, you might feel that plastic grocery sacks are public enemy No. 1. However, cities attempting litter and waste reductions by imposing bans on plastic bags are seeing serious unintended consequences that are proving to be more troublesome and more damaging to the environment than the original problem.

The path America is taking to resolve the plastic bag issue is neither sound economically, nor greener, healthier or more responsible. A true solution exists, but we must stop ignoring the negative outcomes from current plastic bag bans simply to score political points or claim a victory for the environment.

When a bag ban is enacted, the use of reusable bags – 90 percent of which are imported from China – and paper bags jump significantly. Life cycle studies show that imported reusable bags must be reused more than 50 times to provide an environmental benefit comparable to that of using a plastic bag only once.

Perhaps most troubling is evidence that where local bans on plastic bags have been implemented, there has been an exponential increase in the use of paper bags. Sadly, the anti-plastic lobby and public policymakers are now ignoring the fact that a single-use paper bag requires cutting down and shipping trees to be manufactured, using millions more gallons of water, energy and chemicals. The process emits staggering amounts of industrial pollution and destroys animal habitats. Yet, this is somehow now an acceptable alternative to plastic bags.

Plastic bags replaced paper bags 30 years ago because plastic was considered environmentally superior to paper. This illogical willingness to return to paper bags misses the point entirely: The desired solution is to preserve resources, reduce waste and effectively recycle.

We all want products that are made with recycled content, are reusable, require fewer resources to produce and can be effectively recycled at the end of life. Products that meet these standards are smarter. Using this scorecard, the issue isn't whether Americans want or need plastic – it is finding ways to develop smarter plastic.

Smarter plastic and the solution to the plastic bag dilemma have already been implemented

in many European countries. Plastic grocery bags in Europe have evolved from a thin material, which was difficult to reuse and recycle, to the now-thicker reusable plastic bags made from recycled plastic.

European consumers bring their own bags or pay approximately 15cents to purchase a recycled reusable plastic bag, which is strong enough to be reused many times over. Consumers are encouraged to return worn plastic reusable bags to the stores in exchange for new bags, creating a closed-loop “bag for life” system.

What’s more, industrial and agricultural plastic is also collected, recycled and sold to domestic plastic bag manufacturers in order to make environmentally preferable and affordable reusable bags. Jobs are kept local. Carbon footprints are lowered. Waste is diverted. Consumers are happy and involved. The solution is sensible, simple and sustainable.

Here in California, we send an estimated 150 million pounds of agricultural plastic straight to landfills every year. Instead, we can implement a common sense and sustainable solution that moves us forward by recycling plastic for the purpose of making reusable, recyclable bags.

Continuing to vilify plastic or ban items because they are not being recycled, even when they can be, is a dead end. Reducing the number of bags, and recycling with a purpose, are the answer.

To make this a reality, this solution must be embraced, whether by legislation or by grass-roots community action. Grocers must demand their plastic bag suppliers produce affordable reusable plastic bags. Plastic bag manufacturers must embrace recycling and create the next generation of smarter reusable grocery sacks. The consumer must also make the effort to bring their reusable bags when on any shopping trip.

These changes will be good for the environment, the consumer and the economy. The policy already works in Europe. It can work here, too.