



Pete Grande: Ending ‘paper or plastic’ debate

The path America is taking to resolve the plastic bag issue is neither sound economically, greener or more responsible. A solution exists, but we must stop ignoring the negative outcomes from current plastic bag bans simply to score political points or claim victory for the environment.

When a bag ban is enacted, the use of both 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 revealed where local bans on plastic bags have been implemented – an exponential increase in the use of paper bags. Sadly, public policy makers 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. We 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 developing smarter plastic.

Smarter plastic and the solution to the plastic bag dilemma has 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 15 cents 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 collected, recycled and sold to domestic plastic bag manufacturers to make environmentally preferable and affordable reusable bags. Jobs are kept local. Carbon footprints are lowered. Waste is diverted. Consumers are happy and involved.

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 amount of bags and recycling with a purpose is the answer.

To make this a reality, this solution must be embraced. 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.