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10 Reasons Why Florida Should Regulate “One Use - Single Use” Plastic Bags

In 2008, the Florida Legislature modified the Resource Recovery and Management (Chapter 403.7033 F.S.) to prevent local governments from enacting any rule, ordinance or regulation that would prohibit or restrict the use of plastic bags. The Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP) is holding public hearings on the topic and will submit a report with conclusions and recommendations regarding the regulation of plastic bags to the Florida Legislature, no later than February 1, 2010.

Comments concerning the regulation of retail plastic bags can be made at: <http://www.dep.state.fl.us/waste/retailbags/>

ManaSota-88 has recommended banning retail plastic bags from the Sarasota and Manatee County landfills. We continue to recommend banning the use of these bags and will again request both counties no longer accept plastic grocery bags into their landfills.

1. Costs to Taxpayers

Plastic grocery bags add cost to local street cleaning programs, reduce the value of recycled and composed materials and add cost to stormwater sewer maintenance programs.

Plastic grocery bags are not free. Retailers in the United States spend \$4 billion a year on plastic retail bags. The cost of using plastic bags results in higher prices at the checkout counter. Retailer's can save on cost if consumers bring their own reusable bags.

2. Litter

Plastic retail bags create a significant litter problem for streets, beaches, sewer systems and the marine environment. It is estimated that plastic makes up 80% of the volume of litter on roads, parks, and beaches. Plastics make up 90% of floating litter in the ocean and 47% of the wind borne litter escaping from landfills.

3. Low recycling rates

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) estimates that nearly 88% of all plastic bags are not recycled.

Plastic bags are of little recyclable value. Over 4 million tons of plastic bags are disposed of each year in U.S. landfills, very few are actually recycled.

Equipment and operational problems can and do occur at recycling centers. Retail plastic bags reduce worker efficiency at recycling centers and increase the risk of injuries to employees.

4. Wildlife Impacts

According to the EPA, plastic bags endanger wildlife by polluting land and water. It can take more than 1,000 years for a plastic bag to break down in a landfill.

Plastic bag litter is known to be lethal to marine wildlife; killing at least 100,000 birds, whales, seals and turtles every year.

Additionally, plastic bags tend to decompose into smaller pieces that can easily enter the food chain and disrupt marine and freshwater ecosystems.

5. Landfills

Landfills are easy to find, not only by their smell or their visual impacts, but also by the trail of plastic bag litter that blows off of garbage trucks en route to the landfill. Plastic bags are the #1 “fly away” issue for landfills as these bags can easily become airborne and blow onto adjacent properties. To reduce the possibility of litter, landfill managers sometimes need to use additional cover at additional expense to bury the bags in a timely manner.

According to the FDEP, deer, raccoons, opossums, bears and other known garbage and landfill scavengers have been found with retail bags within their guts or have been seen eating such items. Retail bags, plastic in particular, can cause digestive system obstruction and lead to a variety of deaths including starvation.

6. Stormwater management

Plastic bags are a main source of stormwater pollution and a major maintenance issue in stormwater management systems. Retail plastic bags frequently clog pipes and drainage ditches, adding to the cost of storm water management operations.

Additional personnel have to be assigned to perform daily trash pickup from storm water drains and ditches, otherwise, standing water accumulates in storm water ditches increasing the chances of flooding and waterborne infectious diseases.

7. Plastic Bags are made from non-renewable resources

Manufacturing, transporting and disposing of plastic bags requires petroleum; this uses energy and causes pollution. The disposal of bags creates greenhouse gases, increases litter, and takes up landfill space.

The United States should not waste our limited energy resources on producing and disposing of an unnecessary item such as retail plastic bags.

8. Plastic bags are non-biodegradable.

Plastic bags take between 400 - 1,000 years to biodegrade.

The average time a plastic bag remains in the litter stream is 60 months.

According to the FDEP, as plastic bags degrade, some of the manufacturing chemicals are released into the water or atmosphere and it is likely that some degradation of plastic bags releases greenhouse gases.

9. Legislation

Other states have realized the true cost of retail plastic bags. Eight states have enacted retail bag regulations at either the state or local level: California, Texas, New York, Illinois, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan and North Carolina. Sadly Florida is not one of these states despite our population size warranting such legislation.

Thirty-three countries worldwide have enacted or are proposing retail bag regulations.

There is no reason why Florida should not enact legislation to reduce the impact plastic bags are having on our environment and our pocketbook.

10. Alternatives Exist

The best alternative to using plastic bags is not to use any bag at all. The next best alternative is using reusable bags and biodegradable bags. There is a wide range of reusable shopping bags available from retailers. Backpacks, beach bags, canvas bags and shopping bags can be better substituted for plastic grocery bags.

Bags usually are not even necessary if grocery items are only carried a short distance to the car. Shopping carts can be used to carry most groceries without the need for retail plastic bags.