

Key findings from studies used by the Cities of San Francisco and Seattle, when those cities were looking into the environmental impacts of disposable and compostable shopping bags, answer our most common questions about the strong advisability of using only reusable bags when shopping for groceries and all store purchases. Some of these key findings may answer your questions about the disposable alternatives to reusable bags;

Q: I use compostable grocery bags at the store and again at home. Isn't that the most efficient alternative without causing any environmental drawbacks?

A: While paper and certain plastics may be biodegradable or compostable in specially designed industrial facilities, evidence indicates that this feature may be of little value in the effort to reduce waste: According to the EPA, "Current research demonstrates that paper in today's landfills does not degrade or break down at a substantially faster rate than plastic does. In fact, nothing completely degrades in modern landfills due to the lack of water, light, oxygen, and other important elements that are necessary for the degradation process to be completed."

Further, compostable plastics, which are produced from plant-based feedstock, do not degrade in landfills, either. According to Natureworks®, a producer of a corn-based plastic known as PLA, containers made from its material will last as long in landfills as containers made from traditional plastics and must be sent to an industrial or food composting facility, rather than to backyard piles or municipal composting centers, if they are to actually biodegrade. Additionally, making disposable bags from feedstock may be a questionable use of our potential food resources.

Q: Aren't paper bags a more environmentally sustainable alternative than plastic bags.

A: It may be surprising to find that this is not so. Consider the following facts:

1. Plastic bags consume less than 4% of the water needed to make paper bags and generate 70% more air and 50 times more water pollutants than plastic bags.
2. Plastic grocery bags consume 40% less energy during production and generate 80% less solid waste than paper bags.
3. And significantly, even though traditional disposable plastic bags are produced from fossil fuels, the total non-renewable energy consumed during their lifecycle is no greater than the non-renewable energy consumed during the lifecycle of paper and biodegradable plastic bags.
4. It is estimated after three uses, reusable plastic bags are superior to all types of disposable bags --paper, polyethylene and compostable plastic -- across all significant environmental indicators.

Q. So, it sounds like I should be using plastic bags instead of paper?

A. Beyond the fact that it takes roughly 12 million barrels of oil every year to make the 380 billion plastic bags used at check out lanes across America, the continued

damage done in our ecosystems and wildlife for centuries after the bag is once used, is its worst trait. Plastic is the largest source of ocean litter and ocean debris, killing at least 1 million sea birds and 100,000 mammals each year worldwide (estimate from U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association). Many animals see plastic debris as food and either suffocate or starve due to ingestion of the plastic. Bits of plastic and whole plastic bags also cause damage when settling into ocean bottoms and coral reefs when covering the living organisms.

CONCLUSIONS AND INDICATED ACTIONS

The conclusion to be drawn about how to reduce the environmental impacts and litter associated with grocery bags is very much in line with both longstanding EPA guidelines and the *ULS Report* philosophy: the issue is not paper or plastic, but rather finding ways to ***reduce, reuse, and recycle*** both of them – *in that order*.

By switching to durable tote bags, and – to a lesser degree - putting more items in fewer bags, avoiding double bagging, and reusing and recycling disposable bags, significant reductions in material and non- renewable energy consumption, pollution, solid waste, greenhouse gas emissions, and litter, will occur.

Trash Travels
Reduce it at its Source

BRING YOUR OWN BAGS