

# Campus Voice

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{THE BLUE BANNER}

Page 20

## Ineffective anti-plastic bag policies damage environment

While San Francisco's plastic bag ban looks like it helps the environment, the lower energy costs and recycling ability of plastic prove otherwise.

San Francisco's legislature passed an ordinance in 2007 banning plastic bags from grocery stores and pharmacies.

By doing so, they remain the exception and not the rule, according to the American Chemistry Council.

The ban prohibits stores with more than \$2 million in sales or pharmacies with five or more locations from offering traditional plastic bags to customers. Affected stores can only use compostable plastic bags, recyclable paper or reusable bags, according to the San Francisco ordinance.

Robert Lilienfeld, editor of the Use Less Stuff Report, visited San Francisco after the legislators passed the ban. He went to several different chains affected by the ban including Kroger, Whole Foods and Walgreens.

Lilienfeld found several retailers went back to using paper bags, which if recyclable, the ordinance allows. Additionally, he found customers didn't bring their own bags regularly.

Further, he reported plastic recycling bins were almost nonexistent or the employees of some stores were unaware of the bins.

Asheville grocery stores are embracing this idea. Earthfare allows customers to bring in their own bags or use store boxes to pack groceries. If customers still want plastic, they pay 5 cents per bag.

"We are trying to do our part to go green," said Kipp McDermott, assistant store manager of Earthfare.

Paper bags require more energy to produce. The ACC reports recyclable plastic bags use 70 percent less energy to make than paper bags. Additionally, they report plastic bags require 91 percent less energy to recycle than paper bags.

So San Francisco doesn't help the environment by banning plastic bags



By Tom McLean  
STAFF WRITER  
TJMCLEAN@UNCA.EDU

**Even though plastic bags require less energy to produce than paper bags, people might want to argue plastic bags hurt the environment.**

and allowing paper bags, and this runs against the national trend.

Most cities across the nation, including Los Angeles and Chicago, promote plastic bag recycling because they see the value it holds, according to the ACC.

From recycled plastic we get construction materials, fencing and more

bags, according to the ACC. But this also presents a problem.

"They take over 1,000 years to breakdown in the landfill, and only 1 to 3 percent of plastic bags actually get recycled," McDermott said.

Even though plastic bags require less energy to produce than paper bags, people might want to argue plastic bags hurt the environment.

Actually, the impact doesn't hurt quite as much as people might think.

Plastic bags make up a small part of the waste included in the U.S. municipal solid waste stream, according to the ACC.

The EPA reports the waste stream to be collected garbage, and what doesn't get recycled, like paper and yard waste ends up in the landfill.



**70 percent**  
It takes 70 percent less energy to make plastic bags than paper bags, according to the American Chemistry Council.

**91 percent**  
Plastic bags require 91 percent less energy to recycle than paper bags, according to the ACC.

**500 billion**  
Experts estimate the world's population uses at least 500 billion plastic bags each year, according to [www.reusablebags.com](http://www.reusablebags.com).

**1 million**  
Experts estimate the world's population uses almost 1 million bags per minute, according to [www.reusablebags.com](http://www.reusablebags.com).

The ACC reported grocery store and retail plastic bags make up less than .5 percent of the total waste stream. The group also reports more than 90 percent of Americans reuse their plastic bags, which is a form of recycling.

The San Francisco ordinance lists compostable plastic bags as one type of plastic bag grocery stores can use.

"They'll breakdown if you put them in an industrial size landfill," McDermott said.

So reusable bags, which must be made of certain materials, remain the final kind of bag people can use.

The ordinance defines a reusable bag as one made of cloth or other washable fabric or plastic that is at least 2.25 mm thick.

Realistically, this benefits the environment the most. Once people start

using a cloth bag to carry their groceries in, they can be used for quite a while.

Also, Earthfare allows customers to use leftover boxes from grocery shipments to pack groceries, or they can bring their own bag, according to McDermott.

"We've had a really high success rate with the way we're doing it," McDermott said. "And we have cloth bags."

On the local level, you can do the same thing as well if you want to cut down on the number of bags you use. But you have to remember to take them into the store.

With Lilienfeld reporting fewer people taking in their own bags, perhaps people need an incentive.

Although Earthfare charges for plastic bags, the environment can still benefit.

"We do offer them. There is a 5 cent charge per plastic bag," McDermott said, adding the store donates this revenue to a nonprofit, which customers may choose. "We have one for clean energy, one for environmental and one for animal and wildlife."

In terms of the environment, cities need to go ahead and start banning paper bags. They require a lot of energy to create, and even though they might be recyclable, as the ordinance requires, people can do a lot better through plastic or their own bags.

We need to continue the national trend of recycling plastic bags and the promotion of cloth bags. Start making a difference by asking retailers about incentives for such an action.

By thinking about the environment, and by looking at the actual numbers, we not only educate ourselves on how we can improve ourselves, we also see what fails.

"We're not really doing it to compete with anyone," McDermott said. "We're just doing it because it's the right thing to do. And hopefully other businesses will see it's the right thing to do and will follow suit."