

Make My Bag Cloth
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We thought we were on the road to reducing the use of plastic shopping bags. California passed SB 270 in 2016 in recognition that plastic bags are environmentally destructive, use fossil fuel, and result in expensive damage to waste management equipment. Sadly, the story has not ended as the law makers intended.

While a large part of the public embraced the law and brought reusable bags when they shopped, COVID brought unfounded fears of lurking bacteria in bags, so the plastic industry saw an opening to capitalize on that fear and increase use of plastic bags. The law required sturdier bags, with some recycled content. So, most plastic bags in stores now comply and are theoretically “reusable”. But practically, not so much.

Today’s plastic bags use 4 times as much plastic and retailers are REQUIRED to charge customers at least \$.10 per bag. Committed customers do reuse bags, but many shoppers have simply slipped out of the habit and are knowingly (or unknowingly) paying for a new bag.

Some stores will provide paper bags, which are at least biodegradable, but still impose a toxic impact from processing and to transport. Roughly half of our local stores do offer paper bags, the rest depend primarily on plastic. The retailer’s cost of a plastic bag is around \$.05, and the law requires that stores use any balance of funds collected for education to reduce plastic use.

According to a 2003 ABC report, Americans make 2.3 trips to the grocery store each week and use five to 10 bags each time. That's between 600 and 1,200 bags per person per year. Assuming that customers use 5 such bags at an average fee of \$.10, they are paying \$60 annually to purchase these bags. In the USA, bags are pervasive. While the average citizen here uses an average of 365 plastic bags per person per year, shoppers in Denmark use an average of four plastic bags per year.

People can do better and there are compelling reasons to avoid the many costs and risks which include:

- **Impeding Recycling.** Plastic bags from at-home curbside recycling can end up tangled in sorting equipment. This slows the recycling process, damages or breaks equipment, puts workers at risk of harm, and makes processing more costly, with costs going to consumers.
- **Wasting fossil fuels.** About 14 plastic bags are equal to the fuel needed to drive 1 mile.

Creating toxic waste in production and disposal. In 2019, plastics generated 1.8 billion tons of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions – 3.4% of global emissions –

with 90% of these emissions coming from their production and conversion from fossil fuels. Compare it to concrete's production which contributing about 7% of GHG emissions.

Plastic bags in landfills or the environment can take up to 1,000 years to decompose. As the plastic breaks down, microplastics are leached into our soil, water, food and air, and endanger animal and human health. Plastic debris now makes up a Texas size floating island north of Hawaii.

The intent of the original law was to discourage use of single-use plastic bags. Instead, according to an August 2023 Los Angeles Times report, it is estimated that the total weight of today's plastic bags is about the same as before SB 270. And studies done with trackers on bags find that few ever reach a recycling facility.

The public should not have to pay for a such a damaging product. The choice is in the hands of shoppers who can bring reusable bags for purchases. Reusing a plastic bag is a great start and paper bags offers an environmentally better choice if you forget to bring a bag. But ideally, the "tried and true" cloth bag is easy to clean, sturdy and capable of many uses. Best of all, cloth bags can make a unique statement, customized to each individual. Even better is the knowledge that we have rejected commercial manipulation which monetizes a basic tool of our shopping experience.

Frankly, we really don't need a law as an incentive to reduce plastic use—it's in our hands, and in the bag!

