

Are Paper Bags Really That Much Better Than Plastic?

August 29, 2011, 3:02 pm • Posted by [Jon Brooks](#)



Photo: katerha

Despite the best [efforts](#) of plastic-bag manufacturers and distributors, a [growing number](#) of California counties have banned plastic bags. And after the state Supreme Court's [ruling](#) last month that Manhattan Beach had the right to prohibit the bags without an environmental review, more such laws might follow.

So the other day some of us public radio types, as is our public-radio wont, are standing around chatting about these developments when I'm surprised to hear QUEST science reporter Amy Standen espousing a somewhat contrarian view on the paper vs. plastic bag issue.

Her view: Plastic bags do indeed present a litter problem, but as to environmental impact on a larger scale -- energy use, greenhouse gas emissions, air pollution -- the benefits of paper bags are negligible.

Here's what she has to say; an edited transcript follows the audio clips...

[Audio: Amy Standen on why paper bags aren't environmentally that much better than plastic bags](#)

I was very surprised to hear Amy Standen's contrarian view on the plastic bags vs. paper.

I sort of view paper bags with this halo effect – in San Francisco, where I live, you can recycle the papers bags but the plastic has to go into the landfill. So go into your view a little bit.

Well first of all, plastic bags have a major strike against them. They're aerodynamic. They get caught in the wind. So that is primary reason cities tend to ban them. In SF, grocery stores don't give out plastic bags. That's because plastic bags end up places they're not supposed to. You think you're throwing them in your trash, but actually they're blowing out of your can, they're getting into a tree, maybe they're getting into a waterway. They're just a mess, and that's why they end up being litter so often.

And if you go to a recycling center, you'll see they gum up the works, and they have to shut down the system every couple of hours for the workers to manually go through and cut with knives plastic bags out of the gears.

But my contrarian view is that, other than that, they're both pretty bad. Plastic and paper both take a lot of energy to produce. Some say paper takes more energy to produce. Paper weighs a lot more than plastic, and so one of the figures you hear a lot from the plastic bag industry is that it takes 7 trucks to transport the same number of paper bags vs. plastic bags. I have no way of fact checking that figure, but its common sense to think that you're going to need more trucks to transport paper bags than plastic bags. More trucks mean means more air pollution in neighborhoods, like in W. Oakland. More trucks means greater greenhouse gas impact.

But what about the landfill and the recycling issue? I can recycle my paper bags but I can't do that to my plastic bags?

One thing you hear from the paper bag advocates is that plastic bags live forever in the landfill. But everything lives for many, many years in the landfill. You can go to a landfill and find a hotdog that's literally 25 years old. That's because landfills are designed not to let the stuff in them biodegrade. They're anaerobic, no oxygen, and there's also

very little water in landfills. Which means the stuff lasts forever. So a paper bag is not going to decompose in a landfill either, at least not on any meaningful time scale. So you may have more plastic bags than paper, but the paper bags are taking up a lot more space than the plastic bags.

And, frankly, in SF, we're already diverting 75% of our waste away from the landfill. Right now, our landfills aren't actually taking in a lot of stuff anyway.

What about the marine mammal issue? Environmentalists say marine mammals will try to eat them, and those are harmful...

Absolutely true. Plastic bags end up being litter more often than they intend to. So that is a very real problem. And that is when it comes down to it the real reason that you see many cities wanting to have these bans. Another count on paper bags' favor is they can be composted so you can fill them w/ your food scraps and put them in the compost bins. But that's only meaningful if you live in a city that has a composting program.

Well if paper is not the solution and plastic is not the solution? Then what is the solution?

Neither of these types of bags is very good. It gets down to this basic issue of disposability. It rarely works out when you go through the environmental calculations. You should probably just bring a bag.

[On the recycling process](#)

Plastic bags are recyclable just like paper bags, but neither of those things has a complete cycle. Both of these things are downgraded. Plastic bags don't get recycled into more plastic bags as you'd want them to be, they get recycled into things like plastic flooring or carpets. Which in turn are not recyclable or at least very difficult to recycle.

Paper bags get recycled not usually into paper bags but into cardboard, that's a little better because cardboard itself is recyclable. But in neither case is recycling the be all and end all, the grand solution. If you care about greenhouse gas and waste, the best solution would be to not get a bag at all.

Or to carry a cloth bag or bring your own bag.