



# Plastic Bag Legislation FAQ

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## SUMMARY – WHAT THIS ORDINANCE WILL DO

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To address the negative environmental impacts of single-use plastic bags and the low rate of plastic bag recycling opportunities, **this Ordinance bans the use of petroleum-based non-biodegradable carry-out plastic bags provided at the point of sale at affected retail establishments.** Produce bags are not affected.

To promote the most environmentally preferable alternative, **the Ordinance encourages affected Retail Establishments to offer education about and incentives for the use of reusable bags.**

To address the negative environmental implications of single-use **paper bags**, while acknowledging the availability of meaningful recycling opportunities for them, **the Ordinance allows the use of paper bags as an alternative to plastic bags and encourages a 5-cent surcharge on paper bags.** The ordinance further stipulates that the paper for single-use paper bags must come from environmentally preferable sources, must be 100% recyclable, and must contain a minimum of 40% recycled content.

## BACKGROUND

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Globally, over a **trillion** single-use disposable plastic bags are used each year, the production of which requires over 12 million barrels of oil and results in the deaths of thousands of marine animals through ingestion and entanglement. Californians alone use 19 billion such bags each year, **and throw away 600 per second.**

The high cost of litter cleanup is borne by the City and its residents. Littered plastic bags are carried by wind and storm water into City storm drains that lead to Oakland's creeks, Lake Merritt, the Oakland estuary and into the Bay.

In 2006, the Council established an "Oil Independent Oakland by 2020" Task Force charged with developing a plan to reduce Oakland's reliance on oil. Almost 10 percent of U.S. oil consumption is used to make plastic, including single-use plastic bags, so discouraging their use serves to advance the mission of this City task force.

## ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

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Plastic bags don't biodegrade, they photodegrade—breaking down into smaller and smaller toxic bits contaminating soil and waterways and entering the food web when animals accidentally ingest plastic bits.

Millions of seabirds and fish, and hundreds of thousands of sea turtles, whales, and other marine mammals die every year from eating discarded plastic bags and other plastics mistaken for food.

## NEED FOR LEGISLATION

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**Q: Why do we need a Ban and a Surcharge? Why not an education campaign aimed at shoppers?**

A: A ban and surcharge are simply more effective. Public education and awareness initiatives are generally moderately effective at raising general awareness but *not* effective at actually changing shopper behavior. The plastic bag ban and surcharge are tried and tested solutions, producing the dramatic results we need if we are to tackle the climate change issue *and* meet our Zero Waste Goals effectively.

**Q: But won't it be difficult to replace plastic bags?**

A: NO. Alternatives to plastic bags are readily available, for as little as 99-cents, the most environmentally preferable of which are reusable cloth bags. There are numerous sources and vendors for these bags, both online and at check-out counters in some grocery stores. Biodegradable plastic bags and paper bags are also superior alternatives to single-use plastic bags

**Q: Can't we just recycle plastic bags?**

A: NO. Less than 5% of plastics are recycled because plastic bags contaminate recycling operations and are otherwise difficult to recycle due to the logistics of sorting, contamination of inks, and the low quality of the plastic used. Moreover, Oakland's residential recycling program does not accept plastic bags for recycling. Many of the plastic bags which are now dropped off for "recycling" at grocery stores are actually shipped to China and other countries where less stringent air quality laws permit their incineration or toxic recycling procedures. Exposure to the toxic by-products of those procedures is borne by the people of these countries.