Reusable Grocery Bags Are Being Banned as Plastics Industry Takes Advantage of COVID-19

States and cities are rolling back plastic bag bans at the grocery store and enacting bans on reusable grocery bags as the plastics industries ramps up lobbying during the COVID-19 pandemic. San Francisco, the first municipality to ban plastic bags, has banned customers from bringing reusable grocery bags while the state of California has lifted their plastic bag ban for 60 days. Oregon has lifted its plastic bag for the same period, and cities like Bellingham, WA, and Albuquerque, NM have announced they will allow the bags during the pandemic. Massachusetts, Illinois, New Hampshire, and Maryland are among the states that have banned or strongly discouraged the use of reusable grocery bags due to coronavirus fears.

> *It is critical to protect the public health and safety and minimize the risk of Covid-19 exposure for workers engaged in essential activities, such as those handling reusable grocery bags.”*
>
> *Gavin Newsom, Governor of California*

Do plastic bags actually protect workers?

There is evidence to suggest that efforts to stop the spread of coronavirus by banning reusable bags don’t actually work any better than using plastic bags does. Scientists have found that coronavirus can linger on hard surfaces like stainless steel and plastic, where the novel coronavirus can survive for

2-3 days. Meanwhile, there is no evidence to date that coronavirus can survive on what we wear and most reusable bags lack the hard buttons and zippers that clothes have.

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At the grocery store, plastic bags don't reduce exposure for customers or essential workers any more than reusable bags do. Plastic bags have been received, stocked, and distributed by a person who has likely not been tested for COVID-19 for a multitude of reasons. Cashiers wear gloves, but many haven't received proper training on how to limit the spread of disease while wearing gloves.

> *So those workers are constantly touching food, people's money, people's hand, carts and touch screens—without cleaning their hands or changing their gloves. But we know that the gloves can carry a bioburden and increases the risk for transfer of germs."*
>
> *Shanina Knighton, nurse-scientist/researcher at the Frances Payne Bolton School of Nursing*

Your grocery store clerk is touching money, their workstation, the plastic bag carousel, every bag they gave you, and every single item you and everyone else in store give them. Simply using plastic bags doesn't stop that.

Properly washed reusable bags eliminate points of exposure for everyone. The cashier doesn't need to touch the bag carousel. The customer isn't handed bags that have been touched by multiple people. The cashier doesn't need to touch the plastic bag carousel that has been repeatedly handled and doesn't even need to touch the reusable bag if the customer holds it open while grocery items are dropped in. Reusable bags are touched by one person and can be washed for reuse immediately upon returning home. So why would governors ban them? The answer lies in the plastics industry.

Influence Infrastructure

Plastics makers have capitalized on coronavirus fears, including heavy pushes from lobbyists to end all plastics bag bans. Groups like Bag the Ban and American Progressive Bag Alliance have been especially active in overturning bans and promoting single-use plastics as a way to maintain public safety. Tony Radoszewski, president and CEO of the Plastics Industry Association, recently penned a letter to Alex Azar, the secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

> *We are asking that the Department of Health and Human Services investigate this issue and make a public statement on the health and safety benefits seen in single-use plastics. We ask that the department speak out against bans on these products as a public safety risk and help stop the rush to ban these products by environmentalists and elected officials that puts consumers and workers at risk."*
>
> *Tony Radoszewski, president and CEO of the Plastics Industry Association*

Plastic bag sales in the U.S. were projected to reach 1.4 billion dollars this year. Thanks to the lift on bans during the pandemic, those numbers will likely be higher than expected. In addition to the rollback of previously instated bans, pending bans have also taken a hit. A proposed ban of plastic and paper bags and polystyrene food containers in New Jersey died in January. The plastics ban proposed in New York has been held since February by a lawsuit filed by Poly-Pak Industries Inc., Green Earth Food Corp., Green Earth Grocery Store, Francisco Marte, The Bodega, and the Small Business Association. Meanwhile, the plastics recycling industry is seeking a 1 billion dollar bailout due to the coronavirus. The U.S. system is notoriously bad at processing plastics with only 10% of plastics actually being recycled.

Plastics Are Not Here to Make Friends

The plastics industry is having a party, and the American people will be left with both the bill and the cleanup. Senator Tom Udall (D-NM) has proposed the Break Free From Plastic Pollution Act.

> *By asking for a billion-dollar handout, Big Plastic is trying to maintain what already is the status quo: that is, taxpayers funding and taking responsibility for the waste of plastic producers…When we surface from this pandemic, plastic pollution will still be at crisis levels – and matters may be even worse, as industry tries to exploit this pandemic to leverage more marketing for single-use products."*
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> *Senator Tom Udall*

Sources:

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- *Plastic bags have lobbyists. They're winning.* – Politico
- *Lawsuit holds up plastic bag ban* – Hudson Valley 360
- *How Long Does Coronavirus Live on Surfaces Like Food and Clothing Before It Dies?* – GoodRx
- *Multiple cities suspend plastic bag bans due to coronavirus concerns* – The Hill