

Plastic Carrier Bags

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- **Plastic bags have become the symbol of a “throw-away society”**
While they are highly functional (able to bear 1,000 times their own mass), light, hygienic and waterproof, plastic bags are often seen as the symbol of a “throw-away society”. This has led the European Commission to regulate in the area with the result that Member States are requested to, either or both, reduce the yearly per capita consumption to a maximum of 90 lightweight plastic bags per person by end of 2019 (and max. 40 by end 2025) or ensure that by end of 2018 these bags are not provided free of charge. They are also allowed to ban lightweight plastic bags.
- **Litter reduction needs better waste management and responsible behaviour**
National authorities should put proper waste management systems in place so that plastic carrier bags no longer end up in landfills from which lightweight plastic bags can fly away. They also need to create incentives to improve consumer behaviour. Educational activities and information campaigns are crucial to understand the societal and environmental impact of littering as well as to encourage long-term behavioural change. It must also be stressed that biodegradability or any other form of enhanced degradation of plastics does not solve the litter issue since such materials do not biodegrade in the natural environment.
- **Plastic carrier bags are often more resource efficient than other materials**
Numerous Life Cycle Assessments of carrier bags have been carried out over the years (e.g. UK Environment Agency in February 2011, Carrefour in 2004), all of which concluded that lightweight plastic bags often come out best compared to alternatives, and that these benefits are further increased when they are reused. The Commission’s LCA review of 2011 concluded that “there is no ideal type of carrier bag [...]. Each of the alternatives has advantages and disadvantages”. Only a non-material specific approach would thus be appropriate at EU level, and citizens should be encouraged to reuse not only plastic carrier bags but all carrier bags.
- **Restricting the use of so-called oxo-degradable plastic bags**
We would support a legislative proposal limiting the use of so-called “oxo-degradable” plastics in Europe since independent studies have shown that the fragmentation process is often inadequate and that the chemicals used are detrimental to the recycling process. We look forward to the Commission’s report on the issue due in 2017.

Key recommendations:

1. **Member States should ensure that carrier bags are not given out for free**
In order to help reduce littering and to effectively promote the reuse of carrier bags, national measures should be introduced to help raise awareness of the value of carrier bags. A mandatory charge on all carrier bags, irrespective of the material, should thus be promoted.
2. **No ban: lightweight plastic bags are often more resource efficient than other materials**
LCAs to date have all concluded that such bags are often the best option, especially when reused, which they are. The real issue which needs to be tackled is bad waste management and irresponsible behaviour.
3. **Carrier bags should be regulated separately from other packaging**
While carrier bags today are considered as packaging under the EU Packaging and Packaging Waste Directive, there are good reasons to treat them differently to other types of packaging since carrier bags are completely independent from the packaged good.