



The ULS Report™

Helping people Use Less Stuff™ by conserving resources and reducing waste.

Bagging Disposable Bags

By Robert Lilienfeld, Editor

There is growing interest in banning all disposable grocery bags – regardless of whether they are paper or plastic. The idea is to reduce litter and waste by ensuring that consumers switch to reusable bags.

On the surface, a total ban sounds great. Supermarkets should love it, since the rather significant costs of buying and storing disposable bags will disappear. (We're ignoring the fact that sales might decline since people can only buy what they can carry in the bags they bring to the store.) The public should also be happy, as the environmental impact of disposable bags will be negated.

To test this hypothesis, we decided to act as if a total ban on disposable grocery bags were taking effect in our home state of Michigan. This meant that we would act as if no bags would be available when we went to the store, regardless of the fact that the bags would be waiting for us at the end of the checkout counter.

The first thing we did was scour the house for all of the paper and plastic bags we could find and put them in a central place for reuse. In the past, we might have taken them back to the recycling center at the grocery store, but the center would no longer be needed if a ban were put in place. This is too bad, because it also means we can no longer recycle the dry cleaning bags, newspaper bags, and other plastic bags we took to the center.

The first time we went to the store we forgot about the ban, and we didn't bring along any of our old bags so we could reuse them. Since we would run out of the old ones in the long run, we bought 5 reusable bags for \$5.00. We

went home, unloaded the groceries, and put our new reusables in the closet.

The next time we went to the store, we forgot about the ban yet again, and left the reusable bags at home. We bought 5 more for another \$5.00. When we got home this time, we unloaded the bags and got smart: We put 5 in each of the two cars. Our new routine would be to empty them in the kitchen and immediately put them back in the trunk of the car from which they had emerged.

While we could still use our newspaper bags to clean up after our pets, we no longer had grocery bags to use for our kids' lunches. So, we had to start buying paper lunch sacs. From an environmental standpoint, this doesn't make much sense, as we're simply trading off the use of one bag for another, and therefore not truly reducing either the production or use of bags.

The final interesting thing that happened was that the reusable bags started to wear out. Once while carrying a full one out of the store, the handle broke and we had to replace it. The experience led us to believe that we would be buying new reusable bags on a fairly regular basis.

Lessons Learned

The first lesson learned was that switching to reusables had unintended consequences. We would no longer be able to recycle other items that were part of the plastics recycling stream: Dry cleaning bags and the like would be going to the landfill, not the recycling center. Plus, the switch would not be free, as we now would regularly be paying for reusable bags plus paper lunch sacs.



The second lesson was that reusable bags have their own environmental costs. It had never occurred to us that they would wear out and need to be replaced. Since the disposable bag recycling centers had been eliminated when our self-imposed “ban” occurred, all we could do with the old reusables (along with our newspaper and dry cleaning bags) was throw them away. Doing so produced an unintended waste stream that somewhat reduced the value of eliminating disposable bags. And, having to now use newly-purchased paper lunch sacs offset the benefits of previously reusing plastic grocery sacs for this purpose.

The Conclusion

Based on our experiences, the benefits of eliminating disposable bags and switching to reusables was not as great as we expected them to be. This does not mean that trying to make changes is the wrong thing to do. But it does mean that governments should not rush to enact such changes without 1.) first thinking through the implications and 2.) carefully assessing the results from places where disposable bag bans have already been implemented.

In the mean time, why don't retailers, municipalities and manufacturers do a better job of encouraging reuse and recycling of disposable bags? 🐼 🐼 🐼

Getting Ready for Winter: The 3 S's (and more)

Winter is coming. Before you crank up the heat, remember that the first of the 3 R's is to *reduce*. What's the best way to do that? Start with **the 3 S's**: sweaters, socks and slippers. Put them on and try lowering the heat by four degrees. Odds are, you'll feel comfortable about the environmental savings as well as the financial savings, which should be around 10%. On average, that should keep an extra \$20-\$25 a month in your wallet.

We would also remind you to replace the filters on your furnace. It'll run more efficiently and do a better job of removing dust and pollen from your home. Also, consider having a professional inspect and maintain your system. We did so, and the efficiency improvements from cleaning and servicing the equipment should easily offset the \$65 we spent.

There's another very good reason to have your system checked: family safety. Inefficient systems may produce unsafe levels of carbon monoxide. (And if you have a carbon monoxide sensor by your furnace, make sure that it's working properly. Use rechargeable batteries if the old batteries need replacing.)

Got a programmable thermostat? Get one! A system that automatically turns down the heat at night (and during the day if no one is home) should quickly pay for itself.

Next, turn off the water to your outside lines. Remove the hoses and coil them so that water is discharged. (Standing water in hoses can freeze, causing them to crack and need replacement.) Store hoses in the garage if possible.

Then, bleed the outside water lines by opening the spigots. Doing so will reduce the chances of having pipes burst during prolonged bouts of very cold weather. 🐼 🐼 🐼

The Federal Trade Commission Needs Your Help!

Want to have input into what companies can and cannot say about the environmental benefits of their products? Now's the time to act!

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) is revising its Green Guides, which were established in 1992 as a way to help marketers ensure that their environmental claims are both true and substantiated. The revised guides include changes designed to strengthen FTC guidance in areas such as biodegradation, compostability, use of renewable resources, carbon neutrality, etc.

You have until December 10, 2010 to make your voice heard. Go to www.ftc.gov and type “green guides” into the search box at the top right corner of the site. You can then find the current guidelines, the proposed additions and changes, and a comment form. 🐼 🐼 🐼

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