**SUPPORT PLASTIC BAG LEGISLATION IN VIRGINIA**

Each US citizen is estimated to use 320 plastic bags per year. With 8.47 million Virginians, that’s 3 billion bags consumed within the state annually. Only 1-3% of bags are recycled; 97-99% end up in VA landfills or waterways. *A bag bill will finally apply an explicit cost to this already economically and environmentally costly product. These monies can be returned to retailers or put towards environmental programs.*

**Jobs & Economy**

* **Government** – Virginia taxpayers spend millions of dollars a year to clean up litter. VDOT estimates that it spends $6 million a year picking up litter on roadways (Adopt-A-Highway provides additional savings of $1.35 million). This only scratches the surface of costs. Plastic bags are a major source of contamination during the recycling process. This, coupled with a shrinking recyclables market due to China’s embargo, is a major waste management problem. Researchers have quantified the cost of bags, factoring in environmental as well municipal costs, settling on $0.10 – $0.20 per bag.
* **Tourism** – Littered beaches are less valuable. One study found that a 75% reduction in beach debris was valued at $46.39 per visitor; a 25% reduction resulted in $14.09 more per visitor. Cleaner beaches = stronger tourism.
* **Fishing** – Plastics are ingested by marine organisms that are vitally important to Virginia’s economy, especially oysters. Fish mistake plastic for food and said plastic has been shown to alter reproductive success and liver function. Less plastic = resilient fisheries.
* **Cotton Farming** – Bags are often swept up in baling machinery, which destroys the entire cotton bale, a loss of hundreds if not thousands of dollars.
* **Retailers** - Unfortunately, retailers (and customers) already pay the fee; it’s just not obvious to the public. By making a fee explicit, retailers won’t have to pay for bags at all, and people can choose whether it’s something they need.

**Environment & Public Health**

* **Wildlife** – Ingestion of (and entanglement in) disposable bags often proves fatal for wildlife. Oysters often mistake broken-down plastic items for food.
* **Water Quality** –A recent NOAA study found microplastics in 98% of all water samples from the Chesapeake Bay. Research finds that plastics can leach potentially harmful chemicals into water, and furthermore, they attract other persistent, bioaccumulative and toxic (PBTs) chemicals that can be passed back up the food chain via seafood.
* **Marine Debris** – The state has a legal obligation to stop litter from entering the Atlantic Ocean. According to NOAA and Virginia’s Marine Debris Reduction Plan, 80% of all marine debris originates on land.
* **GHG** - Plastic bags are made from fossil fuels (and in some situations, natural gas), specifically from High Density Polyethylene. Consequently, they generate harmful greenhouse gases from the moment they’re made.

**Rebutting Myths**

Unfortunately, there are so many myths out there about litter prevention and bag bills. In brief: plastic bags are very rarely recycled (and there are almost no local jobs involved in plastic bag recycling), they don’t reduce greenhouse gases (they typically increase them), they aren’t reused enough to justify their ubiquity, and they certainly aren’t healthier than reusable bags.

**“Plastic bag bills don’t work”**

They certainly do (see all research above). It’s fair to say that some work better than others, but there’s ample evidence that bag bills do work, and little to no evidence that they don’t.

**“Plastic bags are recycled!”**

It’s true that many grocers offer plastic bag recycling. It’s also true that these programs have failed, impressively. Plastic bags are recycled at historically low rates of 1-3%. In other words, 97-99% of all plastic bags are thrown away. Some research has shown that offering recycling can actually increase the consumption of free items because people believe they are engaging in a pro-environment behavior.

**“Plastic bag recycling provides jobs!”**

None of the presented bag bills would adversely hurt companies that use recycled plastics such as Trex in Winchester, as there is a plethora of plastic available to recycle in the United States. If someone says this to you, ask them to prove it! With numbers!

**“Citizens cannot afford the financial burden of this fee”**

While concern for fellow Virginians’ financial welfare is admirable, it’s unfounded. LA County studied the economic consequences of a bag fee and found a maximum burden of $3-4 a year per household. Even this is likely an overestimate. Reusable bags are already incredibly common in US households, and many non-profits in Virginia give away reusable bags free-of-charge. Furthermore, Virginia spends millions of dollars a year cleaning up litter on the tax-payers’ dime. Additionally, an unhealthy Bay endangers the local fishing and tourism industries. No one wants to tan on a littered beach or slurp from an oyster shell filled with microplastics. Cotton farmers loathe plastic bags because bags catch in the gin and contaminate entire bales. It seems that citizens cannot afford the harmful effects of plastic bags.

**“I reuse my plastic bag! I pick up after my dog with plastic bags!”**

Woof! While we completely appreciate the reuse of plastic bags, this does not justify the production and use of billions of plastic bags each year. Retailers and taxpayers should not be required to supply pet owners with plastic bags free of charge. Pet owners (and everyone else) should purchase their own bags, which illustrates to them that there are real costs to these materials.

**“Plastic bag litter only makes up a small portion of the litter”**

It’s important to note that yes, there are many sources of pollution that need to be curtailed. But plastic bags are a big source. According to Clean Virginia Waterways at Longwood University, plastic bags are always among the top 10 littered items found during Virginia cleanups.

**“Plastic bags create less greenhouse gases than paper or reusables”**

This is a grey area and a small point of contention in the environmental community. The production of one disposable plastic bag creates less GHGs than one reusable bag. To make the math work you must, you know… reuse your reusable bag to make it sustainable. And some reusable bags, like cotton bags, may never be used enough to be a truly “green” option. Still, most experts agree that a reusable bag sourced from sustainable or recycled materials is the best option when considering environmental health. This is a moment to emphasize that this law is only a starting point. Educating the public about maximum reuse of bags will be necessary to make the most out of this opportunity!

**“Plastic bags are sterile – reusable bags harbor unsafe bacteria”**

This is a classic case of lying with data. The American Chemistry Council invested in studies that found high rates of bacteria in reusable bags. This is technically a valid finding (though the methodology is terrible). What isn’t said is that the bacteria found are not harmful. According to Consumer Reports : “A person eating an average bag of salad greens gets more exposure to these bacteria than if they had licked the insides of the dirtiest bag from this study.” Basically, most \*things\* in everyday life have bacteria like e. coli lingering on their surfaces. While the risk of food-borne illnesses from reusable bags is very very small, washing your bags occasionally is still a good idea, and rids the bags of 99.9% of all bacteria. And as always, it’s wise to wash any produce you eat, reusable bag or otherwise!

**“Retailers will flounder under the fee”**

Unfortunately, retailers (and customers) already pay the fee; it’s just not obvious to the public. By making a fee explicit, retailers won’t have to pay for bags at all, and people can choose whether it’s something they need.