



What about plastic film? – Part 1

by Roger Guttentag

Ban the bag?

The adoption of single-use plastic bags (SUPB), especially as a replacement for paper bags, during the 1980s by retailers was also accompanied by the proliferation of SUPB litter. The consequences of this trend are well summarized in a 2010 Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FLDEP) document, “Retail Bags Report for the Legislature” that summarizes the reasons for regulating SUPB. These include the cost of litter cleanup, especially from storm water systems and inland and coastal waterways, as well as harm to wildlife, especially in marine ecosystems. The report also lists the various options, along with their pros and cons, that may be considered for reducing the use of SUPB. From the plastic industry’s viewpoint, the most troublesome ones are those that try to financially discourage the use of SUPB, such as fees, or outright bans, which a number of political jurisdictions have enacted starting with the City of San Francisco in 2007.

A good written overview on the current status of SUPB legislation, with a strong concentration on the communities in the Washington D.C. metro region, can be found in the “Plastic Bag Report 2012 Update” that can be downloaded from the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments site. In addition, the FLDEP Retail Bag page has links to maps and lists showing globally where SUPB policies or legislation are being considered or implemented. However, it does not provide Web links to facilitate further research. For those, I would recommend the following sites:

Californians Against Waste – Primarily oriented to promoting SUPB bans in California but has a useful archive of links to news articles on this topic from other locations.

PlasticBagLaws – It doesn’t have a complete national list of SUPB legislation, but it does have a useful directory of links to

reports advocating or opposing SUPB bans and other Web-based information resources.

Surfrider Foundation – This provides a list of short summaries of campaigns or legislation regulating the use of SUPB primarily in the U.S. Many of these summaries have links to relevant websites or actual legislation.

Industry pushes back

The plastic industry, in reaction to the legislative efforts to restrict or ban SUPB, have been working diligently to promote viable alternatives for reducing the problems associated with SUPB usage, as well as demonstrating success in elevating the recovery rates for all film products. The two principal Web resources that have been developed for this purpose, plasticbagrecycling.org and plasticfilmrecycling.org, have similar structure and content though the latter site is the more comprehensive one since it also encompasses plastic bag recycling. You can find on both sites information on how to locate drop-off recycling locations (most locations that accept bags will also take other flexible film products like newspaper sleeves and produce bags), develop collection programs for either consumers or businesses, report successful case studies of various types of programs and how to further support industry-sponsored advocacy efforts. One notable feature of the Plastic Film Recycling site are the links provided for using the How2Recycle label that has been designed for plastic flexible film products. Other useful industry sites that should be consulted for their program and information resources include:

The American Chemistry Council (ACC) – In 2012, the ACC formed the Flexible Film Recycling Group (FFRG) to promote public awareness and high recycling rates for polyethylene film products. I would recommend downloading the report “Plastic Film and Bag Recycling Collection:

The issue of how to increase the quantities of post-consumer plastic film products that are recycled – especially bags – has been getting a lot of attention in the last five years. This interest comes from a variety of directions including environmental advocates (especially for zero waste), solid waste management agencies, retailers and particularly the plastics industry. The question is, of course, why? The most recent municipal solid waste (MSW) data report from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for 2010, shows that the product subcategory for plastic bags, sacks and wraps is about 1.6 percent of total generated MSW, by weight. The data also shows that the overall recovery rate for these products is 11.5 percent (though, in fairness, the recovery rate for low density polyethylene film that are predominately used for bags is approximately 18 percent). So, what you have is a poor recovery rate for a small fraction of MSW.

But here’s another data perspective on plastic film, one that specifically focuses on plastic bags, which can be found on the website Statistic Brain that shows clearly why public concerns over its low recovery rates have accelerated. The Statistic Brain table shows that U.S. consumption of plastic bags is approximately 100 billion annually. Even if we assume that only a small percentage of plastic bags, say 5 to 10 percent, does not get recycled or properly disposed of, that still amounts to billions of bags that are going into all the wrong places on land or water.

National Reach Study” that asserts that an estimated 90 percent and 75 percent of the U.S. population has access, respectively, to a plastic bag or plastic film recycling services through either a curbside program or by living within 10 miles of a drop-off location.

Canadian Plastics Industry Association (CPIA) – The CPIA has a number of resources that are available on plastic bag and film recycling on their site. One recommended document to review is the “Best Practices Guide for the Collection and Handling of Polyethylene Plastic Bags and Film in Municipal Curbside Programs” that was originally published in 1998 and updated in 2011.

British Plastics Federation (BPF) – The Films Working Group section of the BPF site provides a useful overview of plastic bag and film programs and policies as they relate to the United Kingdom (U.K.) or the European Union (EU). A number of useful links are provided to EU or U.K. programs and documents that are discussed in this summary.

Web Address Directory

American Chemistry Council – Flexible Film Recycling Group	http://tinyurl.com/ACC-Film
British Plastics Federation – Films Working Group	http://tinyurl.com/BPF-Film
Californians Against Waste – Campaign to end single-use plastic bags	http://tinyurl.com/CAW-SUPB
Canadian Plastics Industry Association – Plastic Bags	http://tinyurl.com/CPIA-SUPB
Florida Department of Environmental Protection – Retail Bags Report	http://tinyurl.com/FL-SUPB
Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments – Plastic Bag Report 2012 Update	http://tinyurl.com/WashDC-SUPB
PlasticBagLaws.Org	http://plasticbaglaws.org
PlasticBagRecycling.Org	http://www.plasticbagrecycling.org
PlasticFilmRecycling.Org	http://www.plasticfilmrecycling.org
Statistic Brain – Plastic bag statistics	http://tinyurl.com/SB-SUPB
Surfrider Foundation – Plastics bag bans and fees	http://tinyurl.com/Surf-SUPB
USEPA – MSW characterization reports (Tables 7 and 19)	http://tinyurl.com/EPA-Film

Next month

My discussion of plastic film recycling will continue next month with a survey of programs that are being implemented either by the plastics industry or as part of a private-public partnership for testing strategies for increasing film recycling rates.

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