



Single-use plastic shopping bags

Waste prevention efforts in Thurston County

What's the problem?

Thurston County residents use about 90 million plastic shopping bags each year. Besides the energy and resources used to make bags, they affect our environment and wildlife and create a financial burden on retailers and governments. Solid Waste staff is working with citizens, cities, and retailers to identify possible solutions to reduce our use. Visit www.ThurstonSolidWaste.org/Plastics for more information.

Environmental concerns

Plastic bags are lightweight. Even when placed in a trash can, they can become airborne during the collection and disposal process and they end up in our waterways.



Plastic bags are among the 12 items of debris most often found in coastal cleanups.

Whales, dolphins, seals, turtles, and birds mistakenly

swallow plastic for food. Smaller animals routinely become entangled in the bags. Plastic bags wrap around living corals quickly "suffocating" and killing them.

Tiny particles of plastic are just as harmful to marine life. They collect high concentrations of harmful chemicals like PCB and DDT, which leach into animals that eat them. In some places of the North Pacific, tiny plastic bits floating at the surface outnumber plankton 6 to 1.

Land animals like livestock can also swallow or become entangled in plastic bags.

Hidden costs

Retailers in the United States spend about \$4 billion on bags each year and pass the cost on to customers. Some stores offer cash back if you bring your own bag.

Governments and taxpayers must pay to clean up plastic bag litter. Bags also clog gutters and storm drains, which causes costly flooding.

What about recycling?

Plastic bags cannot be recycled in our commingled curbside recycling cart because they tangle in equipment at the sorting facility. Some residents put bags in their recycling even though our outreach materials say not to. This costs the recycling facility an extra \$1,000 per day.

In 2009, Americans threw 9,182 tons of plastic film and bags in the trash. According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the nationwide recycling rate for plastic bags is only 4.3 percent despite the availability of collection bins at stores. Even when plastic bags are recycled, the material is used to make a lower quality plastic product.



*Workers remove bags from equipment at SP Recycling, Inc.
Photo courtesy of Waste Connections, Inc.*

Bags by the numbers

- On average, each plastic bag is used 12 minutes.
- Americans use 30 billion bags each year.
- Nearly 200,000 plastic bags are buried in a landfill every hour.

What are others doing?

Data shows that public education is just not a very successful strategy for reducing demand for bags.

However, supply-side actions like user fees, taxes, bans, and take-back programs have been successful here in the United States and abroad.

In Washington, the cities of Seattle, Edmonds, Mukilteo, Bainbridge Island, Bellingham, Port Townsend, and Issaquah have all banned plastic bags.

What can you do?

Thurston County Solid Waste encourages residents to use durable bags to prevent waste in the first place. When possible, just say, "No thanks, I don't need a bag."

If you have plastic bags around the house, recycle them at the Waste and Recovery Center or at a plastic bag recycle bin at your neighborhood grocery store.

Remembering to bring your reusable bags when you shop is like learning any new habit - you can do it with time and practice.

- Make "bring shopping bags" the first item on your grocery list.
- Keep a bag at the office, in your purse, or in your briefcase.
- Hang the bags on your front door knob, or place them with your car keys.
- Put the bags back in your car right after you empty them.
- Keep your bags in the front seat of your car so you can see them.
- Place a "grab the bags" sticky note on your front door or car door handle.
- Charge yourself a dollar every time you forget your bags. Donate the money to charity.



Get involved now!

We want the community to help us identify solutions, so it is important for everyone to get involved.

Visit www.ThurstonSolidWaste.org/Plastics to find out how to:

- Take our online survey about plastic bags.
- Attend an upcoming community meeting in your city or town. These are scheduled from August 21 through September 19.
- Host a showing of the entertaining documentary *Bag It* for your school, community group, church, or neighborhood. Solid Waste has several copies to loan. We can even attend your event for a discussion after the video.
- Invite Solid Waste staff to speak to your organization about plastic bags. We'll also bring free reusable bags to give to your group.
- Sign up to receive periodic email updates about plastic bag issues and planned events.
- Look for Solid Waste staff at events or at your local store, and take our survey in exchange for a free reusable shopping bag.

Questions?

Contact Loni Hanka at (360) 867-2282 or hankal@co.thurston.wa.us.



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Sources are available at www.ThurstonSolidWaste.org/Plastics.

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