

Eliminate Single-Use Plastic in the State of Rhode Island

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Introduction

As the Ocean State, we want to keep our waters clean, right? Then why do we continue to use plastic straws, utensils, bags, and cups that end up polluting the ocean and choking wildlife? We have all seen the pictures and videos of turtles with plastic rings around their necks and seagulls choking on trash. We did not always use such disposable products, and this practice does not need to continue in the future.

Plastics Are Polluting Our Oceans and Air

Eight million metric tons of plastic are dumped or swept into our oceans each year, killing sea life, filling beaches, and breaking down into hazardous microplastics.¹ In addition, the production of plastics can incorporate dangerous chemicals such as benzene, used to make plastic foam containers and packing peanuts. When we throw these plastics away, they leach these toxins into the groundwater or, when burned, release them into the air. The only successful way to reduce our plastic waste is to eliminate any packaging, container, or item that isn't designed for reuse.

Facts and Data

- **The U.S. is behind the more than 60 countries** that have successfully placed levies or bans on single-use plastics. Just this year, the entire European Union signed on to a proposal to ban them.

- In many of these countries, bans on plastic bags have been very successful. Ireland saw a 94 percent drop in plastic bag use within one year of its 2002 law, and Rwanda has measurably less flooding and erosion as an outcome of its 2008 ban.² The high quantity of discarded bags would clog waterways that led to this flooding. Thus, the reduction in plastic bag use reduced the amount flooding.³

¹ Moses, A. (2018, August 06). Rhode Island Takes First Step to Solve Plastic Pollution. Retrieved from <https://www.clf.org/blog/rhode-island-takes-first-step-to-solve-plastic-pollution/>

² Rosemont, S., Strand, B., & Kerr, C. A. (2018, April 24). Lessons from the Countries Fighting to Kick the Plastic Bag Addiction. Retrieved from <https://www.earthday.org/2018/04/20/lessons-from-the-countries-fighting-to-kick-the-plastic-bag-addiction/>

³ Hardin, T. (2018, January 23). Rwanda Plastic Bag Ban. Retrieved from <https://plasticoceans.org/rwanda-plastic-bag-ban/>

- “Each year, an estimated 18 billion pounds of plastic waste enters the world’s ocean from coastal regions.”⁴
- Of all the plastic we use **in the United States, only about 9 percent is actually recycled.** Most gets thrown away and sent to a landfill. But even if we could get to a point where every plastic bag, package, part, or container is put into a recycling bin, we would still have a pollution problem. Our recycling system simply isn’t designed to handle the surge of plastic we’re using.
- Keep America Beautiful, the massive media campaign to deter littering, was founded by packing and food industries, this insidiously shifted blame for America’s garbage problem from the producers to the consumers in 1953.⁵
- Hordes of animals are eating plastic.
 1. Approximately 52 percent of the world’s sea turtles have eaten plastic debris – much of it undoubtedly originating in the form of plastic bags.”⁶
 2. Animals who swallow plastic bags often suffer from intestinal obstructions, which typically lead to a long, slow and painful death. Animals are also poisoned by the chemicals used to create the bags, or from chemicals that the plastic has absorbed while making its way through the environment.”

Countries, Cities, and Corporations Making a Big Difference

- **Aldi’s** is a great example of a business that makes a small effort to reduce plastic use - they do not give their customers plastic or even paper bags. Customers of Aldi’s must bring their own reusable bags or purchase them from Aldi’s.
- **Boston** has passed a plastic ban ordinance that has retailers adopt similar practices to that of Aldi’s, namely that they mustn’t supply plastic bags to customers.⁷ However, they may still supply recyclable paper bags and compostable bags, or they may sell plastic bags for 5 cents. We disagree with selling plastic bags because it defeats the purpose of protecting the environment. We believe this is a ruse offered by

⁴ Parker, L. (2018, December 20). Fast facts about plastic pollution. Retrieved from <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2018/05/plastics-facts-infographics-ocean-pollution/>

⁵ Plumer, B. (2017, June 27). The Origins of Anti-Litter Campaigns. Retrieved from <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2006/05/origins-anti-litter-campaigns/>

⁶ World’s turtles face plastic deluge danger. (2015, September 14). Retrieved from https://www.eurekalert.org/pub_releases/2015-09/uoq-wtf091315.php

⁷ Reducing plastic bags in the City of Boston. (2018, December 20). Retrieved from <https://www.boston.gov/departments/environment/reducing-plastic-bags-city-boston>

governments to create a tax in the form of a surcharge, while pacifying the plastics industry and making consumers believe they are doing the right thing at the same time.

- With that, “in August 2014, **California** became the first state to enact legislation imposing a statewide ban on single-use plastic bags at large retail stores. The bill also required a 10-cent minimum charge for recycled paper bags, reusable plastic bags, and compostable bags at certain locations.” Hawaii also banned plastic bags and those with less than 40 percent recycled material, and in D.C. “all businesses that sell food or alcohol to charge 5 cents for each carryout paper or plastic bag.”⁸

- **New Zealand** is the latest country to ban single-use plastic bags, following Bangladesh, China, Israel, South Africa, the Netherlands, Morocco, Kenya, Rwanda, Mauritania, Sri Lanka, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, Albania and Georgia. Retailer that do not phase out plastic bag use within 6 months will be fined. Other countries like the UK have implemented fees on plastic bag use.⁹

- **Toronto** placed a 5 cent fee on plastic bags - plastic bag use decreased 53 percent during the implementation of the fee (before the fee was struck down by city council). Our analysis demonstrates that total bans without fees or bans with significantly high fees produce an 80-90% reduction in plastic use.

- “As of 2016, many **German companies** have voluntarily committed to no longer offer plastic bags to customers for free as a means to discourage their use.” Many German companies like supermarkets and grocery stores no longer offer free plastic bags. Instead, the customer must decide to buy a bag or carry their own goods. This in turn has led to a massive decrease in plastic use. “According to the Wiesbaden-based association, German residents used 29 plastic bags per capita on average in 2017 compared to 45 per capita in 2016.”

Recommendations to Reduce Use of Plastics in Rhode Island

- Rhode Island should begin a statewide effort to banning stores from using disposable plastic bags. Companies can choose to sell customers reusable bags or simply require customers to bring their own.

⁸ STATE PLASTIC AND PAPER BAG LEGISLATION (2019, April 5th). Retrieved from <http://www.ncsl.org/research/environment-and-natural-resources/plastic-bag-legislation.aspx>

⁹ Klein, A. (2018, August 10). New Zealand becomes the latest country to ban plastic bags. Retrieved from <https://www.newscientist.com/article/2176417-new-zealand-becomes-the-latest-country-to-ban-plastic-bags/>

- Rhode Island can take a cue from its friendly neighbor Connecticut: “The legislature’s Environment Committee approved legislation Monday that would ban Connecticut stores from giving customers single-use plastic bags starting in January 2020. The proposed law would require paper bags issued by stores to be 100 percent recyclable and contain 40 percent recycled material.”
- We unequivocally reject this 10 cent fee option because a surcharge of 5 cents or 10 cents for bags does not significantly reduce the problem. Our analysis demonstrates that while the public has a false perception that fees on bags improve the problem, in reality, plastics are reduced very gradually over a period of time. The plastic bag surcharge is perceived as a hidden tax for revenue and to pacify the plastics industry, while the environment continues to choke from elevated rates of pollution. For a plastic bag fee to be an effective deterrent for customers in the United States, it must cost customers the equivalent of 50 cents. In 2002, Ireland banned plastic bags and realized an immediate significant 94 percent drop in plastic bag use when it instituted a 33 cent plastic bag fee.¹⁰ A fee has to be significant for a significant drop in use.

Stakeholders in Rhode Island Must Help Reduce the Use of Disposable Plastics

- We are suffocating our beautiful oceans and beaches, even the air we breathe. It will only get more devastating if we do not put a stop to it now. If Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern of New Zealand, with a population of 4.5 million, can ban guns as fast as she did, then Governor Raimondo can rid Rhode Island of plastic bags easily.
- We are seeking meetings with state representatives, and Congress Members to bring our advocacy to their attention.

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¹⁰ Rosenthal, E. (2008, January 31). By 'bagging it,' Ireland rids itself of a plastic nuisance. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/31/world/europe/31iht-bags.4.9650382.html>

