

Curbing our voracious appetite for plastic bags

By Lois Levin/Guest Columnist

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Newton - Before 1977, we lived in a world without plastic bags. Today, 500 billion to 1 trillion plastic bags are consumed worldwide annually — 100 billion bags in the U.S. alone.

Conventional plastic bags are made from nonrenewable fossil fuels that contribute to global warming. Since only a tiny fraction of conventional plastic bags are recycled into more bags or other products, manufacturers keep producing more of them. They are much cheaper than paper bags. Although retailers provide “free bags,” ultimately the cost is passed on to consumers.

Standard plastic bags break down into smaller and smaller pieces over time, but the plastic in them does not decompose. With the exception of a tiny percentage of plastic that has been incinerated, all of the plastic that has ever been manufactured, including EVERY plastic bag, will be with us until the end of time.

Some of this plastic is already coming back to haunt us by taking up residence in the high seas. Today country-sized “islands” of plastic bags float in the Pacific Ocean! Plastic bag pollution is a serious threat to wildlife. Hundreds of thousands of sea turtles, birds, marine mammals and other animals die each year from the consequences of swallowing plastic bags or bits of plastic bags that look deceptively like food.

Plastic bags are a health threat to humans, polluting the soil, our oceans, rivers, lakes and streams. When we eat seafood, we are at risk of ingesting tiny bits of plastic. There is evidence that plastic pollution, because it captures rainwater, creates breeding grounds for disease-carrying mosquitoes. And each year we spend millions of dollars collecting plastic bag litter.

Today there are strong plastic bags available that are derived from vegetable matter — potatoes and corn — that completely degrade and can be composted, and some large retailers are using them. They are more expensive than conventional plastic bags derived from petroleum, but their cost is being reduced as demand picks up.

Many retailers and consumers do not want to go back to relying exclusively on paper bags. Although brown bags with handles are great for paper recycling, they often aren't reusable in other ways — they absorb moisture, cannot be tucked into a pocket when you go out to shop and cannot be cleaned when soiled. Environmentalists also discourage the use of paper bags, mainly because of the significant environmental costs involved in the manufacture and recycling of paper.

The city of San Francisco has just enacted a law, with very broad public support, giving supermarkets and other major retailers from six to 12 months to stop using

conventional plastic bags. Noncompliance will incur a fine. This ban will reinforce retailers' efforts to provide incentives for customers to acquire reusable bags, such as those made of canvas. The ban may also encourage the increased use of compostable bags.

San Francisco's move is part of an international trend. South Africa, Taiwan, Bangladesh and Paris have already banned plastic bags. Ireland enacted a "Plastax" on every plastic bag in 2002, which curtailed plastic bag use in that country by a whopping 90 percent in three years. There, consumers are charged a fee at checkout for every (plastic or paper) shopping bag taken, and the fees collected are used for cleanup, disposal, education and to offer discounted durable, reusable shopping bags to low-income shoppers.

Curbing the use of plastic bags will not stop global warming, but it is a big step forward. Municipalities such as Newton, as they seek to reduce the consumption of fossil fuels, lower cleanup costs and protect the environment, could enact similar ordinances.

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