

Lift #NeverNeeded Plastics Regulations and Bans—Permanently

By Angela Logomasini, Ph.D.*

Since the COVID-19 pandemic hit, lawmakers have finally begun considering the unintended impacts of bans on single-use plastics, particularly the potential for disease transmission from reusable products. Such risks have always existed and will continue long after the COVID-19 crisis ends. Policy makers need to acknowledge that plastics bans pose health risks and that there is not much evidence that they achieve desired environmental goals. Accordingly, they should make permanent the temporary lifting of bans and regulations on single-use plastics.

During the past several years, bans on single-use plastics proliferated at the state and local levels, and many were set to start in 2020, including a statewide ban on single-use plastic bags in New York state. Yet now, lawmakers around the nation have either postponed commencement of recently passed bans or reversed longstanding bans because of concerns that reusable bags may harbor COVID-19.

For example, New York has delayed enforcement of its plastic bag ban until June.¹ San Francisco—one of the first cities to ban single-use plastic bags—and several other California localities have halted single-use plastic bag bans temporarily and have even banned bringing reusable bags and refillable coffee mugs into stores.² In addition, some retailers, such as Starbucks and Dunkin', have announced that they will no longer allow their customers to get refills in reusable cups.³

While outright bans on reusable products go too far, it makes sense now—as it always has—to allow people the freedom to access single-use plastic products. And, of course, retailers should maintain their right to provide, permit, or prohibit both single-use and reusable products as they see fit.

When given the choice, consumers often choose single-use plastics because they are convenient, but now they may also consider them more valuable in reducing disease transmission risks. Research has long demonstrated that reusable bags and other products can harbor many dangerous microorganisms, so the risks are not limited to COVID-19. Consider some of the key research on the topic.

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2011 University of Arizona and Loma Linda University study. This study examined a sample of reusable bags from shoppers and found “large numbers of bacteria,” including dangerous fecal bacteria such as coliform, E. coli, and salmonella. Bacteria was found in 99 percent of the reusable bags, while no bacteria or viruses were found in a sample of disposable plastic bags and new reusable bags. Bacteria can easily be transferred from leaking meat packages as well as from fruits and vegetables, and the study found it grows in bags that are stored in car trunks.⁴

2012 Study on Norovirus Transmission from a Reusable Bag. This 2012 study found that nine members of a soccer team in Oregon contracted the norovirus, a leading cause of food poisoning, from touching a reusable bag or eating food contained inside. The bag had been stored in a bathroom. That might seem like an outlier, but people cart these bags all over the place, touching surfaces on public transportation, taking them into public bathrooms, and other places, creating lots of opportunities for the bags to pick up bacteria and viruses.⁵

2018 Study on the Potential spread of Norovirus from shopping bags. This 2018 study assessed the probability of norovirus transmission from reusable grocery bags carried around in supermarkets using a similar, but not infectious, virus as a proxy. It found that the virus easily moved from the bag all around the store, with a high concentration found on the hands of both consumers and store checkout clerks.⁶

Studies related to pathogens found on reusable utensils. Single-use plastic bags are not the only reusable products that can transmit pathogens. Studies dating back to the 1970s showed that reusable utensils often contained dangerous levels of bacteria even after being washed, particularly in fast-paced restaurants where a high volume of people circulate in and out quickly.⁷ Of course, not all food service outlets need to use single-use utensils, but all should have the option. Indeed, fast food eateries, school cafeterias, hospitals, nursing homes, and other medical facilities have long relied on single-use plastic products to help reduce risks of disease transmission. Banning such uses is dangerous.

The COVID-19 pandemic underscores already well-known risks associated with bans on single-use plastics, prompting researchers to speak out. Back in February, Clemson University Professor Robert M. Kimmel, author of a 2014 life-cycle study on plastics, urged New York state to halt its ban at least until the coronavirus is under control.⁸ Kimmel explained that his research shows that reusable bags are “highly likely to be contaminated with bacteria and viruses and could transfer this contamination to people by contact with supermarket check-out conveyors, grocery carts, kitchen counters, and other surfaces.”⁹ The reusable bags should be thoroughly washed after *every use*, says Kimmel. Yet only 3 percent of reusable bag consumers ever wash the bags according to a survey conducted by Charles P. Gerba and colleagues at the University of Arizona.¹⁰

In addition to posing public health risks, single-use plastic bans also fail to meet the environmental goals they supposedly serve. In fact, reusable bags require far more energy

and other resources to make and may produce more landfill waste. For example, a study produced for the Environment Agency in the United Kingdom found that cotton bags would have to be used 131 times before they yielded environmental benefits.¹¹

Still, many people are rightly concerned about plastics becoming part of the ocean pollution problem, but the answer to that real problem is much simpler: Ensure that products are disposed of properly, so they never enter waterways. Fortunately, while we can always work to improve, the United States does a relatively good job properly disposing of trash. A 2015 study published in *Science* magazine estimated that the U.S. contribution to ocean pollution is less than 1 percent.¹² In fact, most of the waste entering the oceans come from overseas. China and 11 other Asian nations are responsible for 77 percent to 83 percent of plastic waste entering the oceans because of their poor disposal practices.¹³ Accordingly, banning single use plastics in the United States will not solve very real ocean pollution problems.

Bans on single use plastics are largely symbolic actions that not only reduce consumer choice, they pose public health risks while failing to achieve desired environmental goals. State and local governments should roll back all such regulations and allow consumers and retailers to decide which options they prefer.

Notes

¹ Sophia Chang, “Enforcement of New York’s Plastic Bag Ban Delayed to June,” *Gothamist*, April 18, 2020, <https://gothamist.com/food/enforcement-new-yorks-plastic-bag-ban-delayed-june>.

² Shwanika Narayan, “Six Bay Area Counties Ban Use of Reusable Bags at Grocery Stores,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 7, 2020, <https://www.sfchronicle.com/business/article/Six-Bay-Area-counties-ban-use-of-reusable-bags-at-15182959.php>.

³ Sunny Hernandez, “Coronavirus Causes Starbucks, Some Dunkin’ Donuts to Suspend Use of Refillable Mugs,”

Syracuse.com, March 9, 2020, <https://www.syracuse.com/coronavirus/2020/03/coronavirus-causes-starbucks-some-dunkin-donuts-to-suspend-use-of-refillable-mugs.html>.

⁴ David L. Williams, Charles P. Gerba, Sherri Maxwell, and Ryan G. Sinclair, “Assessment of the Potential for Cross-contamination of Food Products by Reusable Shopping Bags,” *Food Protection Trends*, Vol. 31, No. 8, (August 2011), pp. 508–513, <https://lruh.org/sites/medical-center.lomalindahealth.org/files/docs/LIVE-IT-Sinclair-Article-Cross-Contamination-Reusable-Shopping-Bags.pdf?resource=medical-center.lomalindahealth.org/sites/medical-center.lomalindahealth.org/files/docs/LIVE-IT-Sinclair-Article-Cross-Contamination-Reusable-Shopping-Bags.pdf>.

⁵ Kimberly Repp and W.E. Keene, “A Point-Source Norovirus Outbreak Caused by Exposure to Fomites,” *Journal of Infectious Disease*, Vol. 11, No. 205 (June 2012), pp. 1639-41, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22573873>.

⁶ Ryan Sinclair, Andre Feliz, and Jaimini Patel, “The Spread of a Norovirus Surrogate via Reusable Grocery Bags in a Grocery Supermarket,” *Journal of Environmental Health*, Vol. 80, No. 10 (June 2018), pp. 8-14, https://www.neha.org/sites/default/files/flipping_book/june-2018-jeh/index.html#8/z.

⁷ Morton S. Hilbert and James Henderson, “Disposables versus Reusables: A Study of Comparative Sanitary Quality,” *Dairy Food and Sanitation*, 1985,

http://pleass.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/packaging_03.pdf. Charles W. Felix, Chet Parrow, and Tanya Parrow, “Utensil Sanitation: A microbiological study of disposables and reusables,” *Journal of Environmental Health*, Vol. 53, No. 2 (September/October 1990), pp. 13-15, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44541332?seq=1>.

⁸ Robert M. Kimmel, Sc.D., *Life Cycle Assessment of Grocery Bags in Common Use in the United States*, Clemson University Digital Press, 2014, https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/cudp_environment/6.

⁹ Stephen Witt and Chaya Gurkov, "Clemson Professor Says Delay Bag Ban For Coronavirus Concern," Kings County Politics, February 28, 2020,

<https://www.kingscountypolitics.com/clemson-professor-says-delay-bag-ban-for-coronavirus-concerns>.

¹⁰ Jeff Harrison, "Reusable Grocery Bags Contaminated with E. Coli, other Bacteria," *University Communications*, University of Arizona, June 24, 2010,

<https://uanews.arizona.edu/story/reusable-grocery-bags-contaminated-with-e-coli-other-bacteria>.

¹¹ United Kingdom Environment Agency, "Life cycle assessment of supermarket carrier bags: a review of the bags available in 2006," Report: SC030148, February 2011,

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/291023/scho0711buan-e-e.pdf.

¹² Jenna R. Jambeck, Roland Geyer, Chris Wilcox, Theodore R. Siegler, Miriam Perryman, Anthony Andrady, Ramani Narayan, and Kara Lavender Law, "Plastic Waste Inputs from Land into the Ocean," *Science*, February 13, 2015, pp. 768-771,

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¹³ Ibid.