

Ripple Effect #16

Paper or Plastic?

Terry Brennan from the Twin Cities Green Guide offers the following tips on making your next shopping trip a better one for the environment.

The question "Paper or plastic?" has become a routine part of our grocery shopping experience. Maybe you answer that question automatically, without even thinking. Or maybe you pause, wondering, "Which is better for the environment?" The answer is: neither paper nor plastic is the best choice. Did you know, for example, that most paper grocery bags are made from virgin paper? Recycled paper is just not strong enough to hold your groceries. Most virgin paper comes from wood pulp, which comes from trees growing in forests. Forests are not a renewable resource. Tree farms are, but forests are not. Every time you choose paper bags at the grocery store, you are contributing to the loss of forests. Worse, virgin paper is bleached using chlorine. The bleaching process leaves toxic residues, such as dioxin, in the paper and in our water systems.

Plastic bags are just as bad. Plastic is made from petroleum, which is not a renewable resource. Every time you choose plastic bags, you are contributing to the depletion of the world's oil supplies as well as the devastation of habitats where oil is found. Some plastic is biodegradable. Unfortunately, it has to be exposed to sunlight or to soil to biodegrade. Only a small percentage of the biodegradable plastic in landfills has that kind of exposure. Additionally, plastic may or may not be recyclable depending upon the type of plastic and your community's recycling program. Only thermoplastic-type plastic (milk jugs, grocery bags, drinking straws, foam cups) have properties that allow for recycling. Unfortunately many recycling programs do not accept all thermoplastic products. You might be able to recycle milk jugs, but not grocery bags.

Recycling bags, both paper and plastic, after you use them helps to cut down the amount sent to landfills or the amount burned in incinerators. The paper recycling process uses fewer trees, less water and less energy than does the production of virgin paper. Keep in mind that recycling paper still involves de-inking, bleaching and processing. Also, hauling paper from your curbside to the recycling plant uses energy and causes air pollution.

The best answer to the "paper or plastic" question is: "Neither, thanks, I brought my own bags." Canvas bags, especially if made from organically grown fibers, are convenient for you and easy on the environment. Just think: if you bring home 10 bags of groceries per week, you can save 520 bags in one year just by

switching to cloth bags! Bringing your own shopping bags is one of the easiest ways you can start to make a positive difference for the environment. For more ideas to cut down your use of paper and plastic products, go to www.thegreenguide.org.

Until the next Ripple Effect,

The Red River Basin Commission (RRBC)

The RRBC is a grassroots organization that is a chartered not-for-profit corporation under the provisions of Manitoba, North Dakota, Minnesota, and South Dakota law. Our offices in Moorhead, MN and Winnipeg, MB can be reached at 218-291-0422 and 204-982-7254, or you can check out our website at www.redriverbasincommission.org.