

The Plastic Bag Ban: A Battle of Socio-Economic Policy

This latest skirmish shows how localities, not the feds, are driving eco-policy.

BY: [Donald F. Kettl](#) | GOVERNING Magazine, February 2012

If you employ reusable shopping bags to carry your groceries, the odds are good, researchers have found, that there's nasty stuff all over your food.

A study conducted by the University of Arizona and Loma Linda University found bacteria in 99 percent of the bags researchers collected outside grocery stores in Arizona and California. Coliform was on half the bags, and E. coli was on 8 percent of them. Add a little leaked juice from a meat container, store in a warm car trunk for a couple of hours and voilà, you have E. coli. Reusable grocery bags, the study concluded, are not good for your health.

The solution? Well, you could wash the bags, which eliminates 99.9 percent of the contamination. Or, and this is music to the ears of the plastic bag industry, you could use disposable bags. The only problem with that is it may cost you. Disposable bags are now the subject of fees and even bans in several local governments across the country.

Environmental activists are pushing hard for bills that ban plastic bags or, at least, charge consumers for using them. They call the bags that get snagged on tree limbs and litter the landscape "plastic confetti," and argue that they unnecessarily add to the piles of trash that end up in our landfills. Still, the plastic bag industry is fighting back with the chorus of the 2012 presidential campaign: jobs.

Take high school student Lex Shapiro in Hailey, Idaho. She and her classmates in the Wood River High School Environmental Club wrote a column for the local newspaper supporting an ordinance banning the use of plastic grocery bags in Hailey. When they noticed the plastic litter in their central Idaho town of almost

8,000 residents, they started digging. "The facts blew us away; 60,000 plastic bags are used in one second!" they wrote in the newspaper. "We believe that plastic bags pose a serious and unnecessary risk to the world." To cap their argument to ban plastic grocery bags, Shapiro and her friends quoted Gandhi.

The campaign, however, ran right into the teeth of opposition from Hilex Poly, a leading manufacturer of plastic bags. The company created a website to fight the students' efforts. The plastic bag industry, the website said, "supports more than 125 jobs right here in Idaho," and that "in these economic times, we should be working to create new jobs, not jeopardizing existing ones." The issue went to a vote in November, and the Wood River students lost, 864-620.

The bag battle is being played out across the country, from San Francisco and Seattle, which adopted a ban on plastic bags in December, to Washington, D.C., which imposes a five-cent charge for each bag used, with the proceeds going to clean up the city's Anacostia River. Nearby Montgomery County, Md., also adopted a nickel-a-bag fee at checkout in January. To help sell the effort to consumers, the chief of the county fire department, along with its costumed mascot Sparky, accepted donations for families in need in exchange for a reusable shopping bag.

At the local level, governments are advancing policy initiatives that national politicians couldn't -- or wouldn't. In late 2011, the Obama administration backtracked on an air pollution initiative, and the Republican presidential candidates have made the "job-killing" U.S. Environmental Protection Agency into an anthem. A once-powerful national movement on climate change and environmental policy has evaporated.

Instead, from high schoolers to firefighters, local activists have defined the front lines of American environmental policy. We surely don't have agreement -- witness the war between the Idaho teens and the plastics company -- but big environmental battles are being fought at the local level.

Following the unsteady pace of global climate negotiations, that's scarcely surprising. The Kyoto round produced only halting progress. Copenhagen was a disappointment. And the most recent negotiations in Durban, South Africa, were, as *The New York Times'* John M. Broder put it, "muddled and unsatisfying." The global initiative on climate change has melted, and that's made it even harder to reach international agreement on any policy steps. The roadblocks at that level are a reflection of national battles, especially in the United Kingdom and United States.

That's left local governments carrying the flag. The global and national puzzle, negotiators have discovered, is that they can't be sure what their citizens are prepared to embrace. Without confidence in consensus, it's impossible to forge a global compromise.

So high schooler Shapiro, mascot Sparky and others on the front lines of local action represent the cutting edge of global policy. "In a way we are sort of turning the Kyoto model on its head," says Elliot Diring, executive vice president of Pew's Center for Climate and Energy Solutions. Nations tried but failed to set top-down international standards. Instead, policy is now moving from the bottom up. "Once we have sorted out at home what we are prepared to do, then it is much easier to bring that into the international context," he says.

It's anyone's guess whether these local steps can reinvigorate environmental policy. But there's little doubt that, with federal policy hamstrung, any American or, indeed, global action will need a strong local base.

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