



**RISE ABOVE PLASTICS ACTIVIST TOOLKIT**  
Your Guide To Reducing Plastic Litter



# Table of Contents

- 3) Make an impact and Rise Above Plastics!
- 4) The problem with plastics.
- 6-10) Six steps to a plastic reduction ordinance:
  - 6) Evaluate your options.
  - 6) Plan your campaign.
  - 7) Draft a proposed ordinance.
  - 8) Build community support.
  - 9) Know the opposition.
  - 10) Rock the vote.
- 11) Conclusion and Call to Action.







# Introduction

## Make an Impact and Rise Above Plastics

Simply put, plastic pollution is a killer. Checkout bags from the grocery store, foam foodware, single-use water bottles, cigarette butts and other plastics are responsible for everything from ugly litter to the death of wildlife. If you want to do something about this problem, the most powerful action you can take is to help your local community, county or state enact a carryout bag, expanded polystyrene foam, or bottle recycling redemption bill. This toolkit will help you do it.

If you are well versed with plastic pollution issues, proceed directly to the “Six Steps to Enact a Plastic Reduction Ordinance”. This toolkit is focused on enacting a carryout bag ordinance but you can apply the process to a foam foodware ordinance, smoke-free beaches or other campaign to reduce plastic pollution. You should be able to read through this material in 30 minutes and refer back as often as you need.

If you're not ready to spearhead a plastic reduction ordinance at the moment but want to help out with education and awareness efforts, we have some suggestions for you! There are plenty of ways to Rise Above Plastics at home, work and school. Visit the Plastic Reduction Resources, which is an addendum to this toolkit, for a variety of information, templates and ideas that you can review, use, and share. We encourage you to add your own creativity and to connect with your local Surfrider Foundation Chapter.

# The Problems With Plastics



## Plastics Don't Biodegrade

Instead of decomposing, plastics break down into small particles that persist in the ocean, absorb toxins, and can enter our food chain through fish, sea birds and other marine life. Plastic litter often travels from land to the marine environment through our watersheds and can accumulate in oceans, bays, lakes and on beaches where it can impact wildlife.

Thousands of marine mammals and sea birds die every year after ingesting or being tangled in plastic marine main food source. Currently, 86% of all known species of sea turtles have reported problems of entanglement or ingestion of marine debris. All tolled, impacts of marine debris have been reported for 663 species. Over half of these reports documented entanglement in and ingestion of marine debris. Over 80% of the impacts were associated with plastic debris. Recent studies estimate that fish off the West Coast ingest over 12,000 tons of plastic a year.\*

## Bags, Water Bottles and Other Plastics Require a Lot of Non-Renewable Resources to Make

The amount of plastic produced from 2000 - 2010 exceeds the amount produced during the entire last century.

Most 'conventional' plastic bags are manufactured from natural gas and it's estimated that somewhere between 500 billion and 1 trillion of these plastic bags are used each year worldwide. In the U.S., 102 billion plastic checkout bags were used in 2009 and most end up in the landfill or as litter. A recent study found that of the various types of shopping bags available, plastic bags had the greatest impact on litter. Even using the plastic industry's own stats, which most believe to be conservative at best, Americans use an average of 500 plastic bags per person per year, for a total of over 155 billion bags used in the U.S. alone every year.\*

In addition to harming the marine environment, natural gas is a non-renewable resource and obtaining it by controversial hydraulic fracturing (fracking) is increasing nationwide. Fracking got an exemption from the federal Clean Water Act and that, along with the associated water consumption and wastewater creation, should be taken into account with plastic checkout bags. Do we really need to use those non-renewable resources for the convenience of double-bagging our groceries from the supermarket?

## Municipalities Spend Millions in Cleanup

In an effort to clean up the trash and recycle as much as possible, municipalities spend millions: California spends \$25 million per year to send discarded plastic bags to landfills. Public agencies in California spend more than \$300 million annually in litter cleanup.\* Landfills often have added fencing and employees to control plastic bags on windy days while plastic bags can also clog the recycling machinery for more profitable items such as PET bottles - both decrease efficiency and add costs. Couldn't our money be spent on something better?

\* Statistics are provided for illustrative purposes. Please be sure to source current, accurate, cited statistics for your campaign.



# What About Recycling?

Although some people argue that plastic checkout bags are okay because they reuse them for other purposes, these bags are flimsy and designed for a single use. At any rate, somewhere between 1.5% and 9% of plastic bags get recycled depending on where you live, and many of those bags are sent overseas where environmental regulations may be lax.\* Recycling can help prevent bags from heading to a landfill but it does little to address bag litter without an incentive to recycle. General rates for bottle recycling are higher, and much higher in states that have a 'bottle bill' or redemption fee as an incentive.



# What About the Alternatives?

Although paper and bioplastic bags may appear to be better options at checkout, both fall short compared to long-term use of a reusable bag. Paper grocery bags are often made from recycled material and they biodegrade if littered but it still takes a fair amount of water and energy to make them. Plus, these bags often take up more space when packaged for distribution, which can increase shipping costs and fuel used in transportation.

Meanwhile, bioplastic bags and bottles are relatively new to the market and constantly evolving. Although they are not made from petroleum source material, they often require petroleum products to manufacture or ship. Many bioplastics claim to be biodegradable or compostable but none of them fully break down in the marine environment to our knowledge. Reusable bags and bottles are the best alternatives.

# How to Make the Switch

Switching to using reusable bags and bottles are the preferred choices both economically and environmentally. It's dramatically cheaper over time to fill your reusable bottle with filtered tap water than it is to purchase single-use bottles. Many stores already offer incentives to bring a reusable bag from rebates and raffles to donations to charity. If everyone brought reusable bags then local municipalities could save taxpayer dollars related to cleanup costs. When education and outreach fail, public policy can step in to help protect the environment.

There are two types of public policy ordinances that stand out regarding bags: banning plastic bags and placing a small fee on paper bags OR placing a small fee on both plastic and paper bags. Both of those offer an added incentive to the consumer to bring a reusable bag to the store. The fees could go to the retailer (for their costs) and/or the city (for a litter abatement fund), depending on local or state laws.

Some cities have adopted expanded polystyrene bans on takeout food containers to help address the foam litter issue. States that have a cash redemption program for bottles and cans have a much higher recycling rate than states without a redemption program. Continue on for an overview of the steps it takes to enact a plastic reduction ordinance.

\* Statistics are provided for illustrative purposes. Please be sure to source current, accurate, cited statistics for your campaign.

# SIX STEPS TO A PLASTIC REDUCTION ORDINANCE

## Step 1) Evaluate Your Options

Get in touch with your local [Surfrider Foundation Chapter](#) early on to work with you throughout this process. You can also email the Surfrider Foundation headquarters office or your regional staff person.

There are several different measures that a city, county or state may consider regarding carryout bags. An 'ordinance' is a local law made by a municipality or other local authority while a 'bill' is a proposed state law. A ban on all plastic bags at checkout is the most effective way to drastically cut back on plastic bag litter. A fee on all types of carryout bags still offers choices and has a financial incentive to remember your reusable bags. Therefore we recommend two options:

- **Ordinance to ban plastic bags and place a 5 to 25 cent fee on paper bags. Most effective way to drastically cut back on plastic bag usage, but some people are opposed to this because it limits choices.**
- **Ordinance to place a 5 to 25 cent fee on all carryout bags (plastic, paper, etc.). Offers the most consumer choices along with an incentive to change their behavior and opt for the best choice: reusable bags.**

Try to include all retailers if possible in the ordinance for the biggest impact. Some cities may offer to pass a resolution to reduce plastic but they are non-binding and should be avoided in favor of an ordinance or law when possible. Increased recycling may be mentioned as an option for plastic bags but avoid supporting bag recycling because it does little to nothing to help solve the main problem, which is litter.

*See the Plastic Reduction Resources for more info on polystyrene ordinances and bottle recycling bills.*

## Step 2) Plan Your Campaign

It takes at least three months (and sometimes years) to properly plan and execute a local ordinance. There needs to be LOTS of local support to be successful. A plastics reduction ordinance campaign can be a great opportunity to help grow your Surfrider Foundation Chapter with more volunteers, supporters, members, etc. Throughout the process keep three ideas in mind: get the facts, build support and know the opposition.

### **A: Deciding to Pursue a Bag Ordinance – get the facts.**

It's always a bit controversial to ban anything, even plastic bags. It's important to use solid facts and a local grassroots effort to be successful. A sample fact sheet is included in the Resources section at the end of this toolkit. 'Take the temperature' of your local City Council to see if a bag ordinance would go over well and if you think that the current makeup of your City Council wouldn't welcome it, it may be best to wait. You can focus on education and outreach in the interim while building a groundswell of support for an ordinance later.

### **B: Developing a Campaign Plan – build support and know the opposition.**

A direct action organizing campaign, such as a bag ordinance, has a beginning, middle and an end. It's critical that you develop a campaign plan to reflect that. You have to develop a strategy, which includes identifying short and long-term goals, identifying targets, tactics and constituents. The resources section includes campaign planning templates.

### C: Executing Your Campaign Plan

It's important to realize that running a campaign is more involved than printing a campaign template, filling in the blanks and hoping for the best. It takes a committed and constant effort, so having the support of your local Surfrider Foundation Chapter is critical. Also, there are many variables between communities (i.e. population, issue awareness, political climate, etc.) that require campaign plan adjustments to various degrees. For detailed information on the campaign planning process, please see the Surfrider Foundation Chapter Resource Book, a comprehensive guide to running a successful campaign and chapter.

## Step 3) Work With Government & Draft a Proposed Ordinance

### Find support.

Make a list of the decision makers that you think would be most likely to support your ordinance and choose an experienced volunteer to contact them. When speaking to city council members or other decision makers individually, make an appointment to visit their office. When you meet, politely assert that you would like to see a measure to reduce carryout bags and ask if they would support such an initiative. Check the resource section for some of the overall facts and stats regarding the issue, but be sure to talk about local reasons that action is needed.

### Find a sponsor.

Someone on the city council or governing body should act as the sponsor for your ordinance. Once you secure that person's support, work with them (and the city attorney if possible) to draft an ordinance. See the resources section for a sample ordinance. Once you secure a sponsor and have your campaign plan, start a social media effort. The earlier you can get started with social media the better. Add those photos, local facts, news stories, upcoming events, 'Bag It' film screenings, etc. to one or two places online that can easily be shared by others. Adding content to a website and Facebook or Twitter are examples – don't dilute your efforts too much.

### Attend city council meetings.

Make sure at least one member of your campaign is present and prepared to speak at every city council meeting when the issue is on the agenda. Before speaking in front of decision makers in a formal setting, you should prepare a short statement and practice your speech. There is usually a time limit, often two or three minutes, so use it well. Explain the importance of the issue, why it's needed locally, and how the ordinance would work. Cite public and retailer support when possible.

An ordinance often requires a series of meetings before being voted on. It may require multiple votes and/or a Mayor's approval, so do your research to determine the process in your community and which meetings/votes are most important. Your sponsor's office should be able to help with the ordinance timeline and some of your planning aspects.





### Step 4) Build support for your ordinance in the community and with city council members.

Education and outreach are key components to build support in your community. Being involved with a Surfrider Chapter can play a key role. Many Surfrider Chapters have existing education presentation programs for schools, community groups and businesses along with hosting info tables at various community events. Info tables are great opportunities to get petitions signed, ask people to contact decision makers and engage new volunteers.

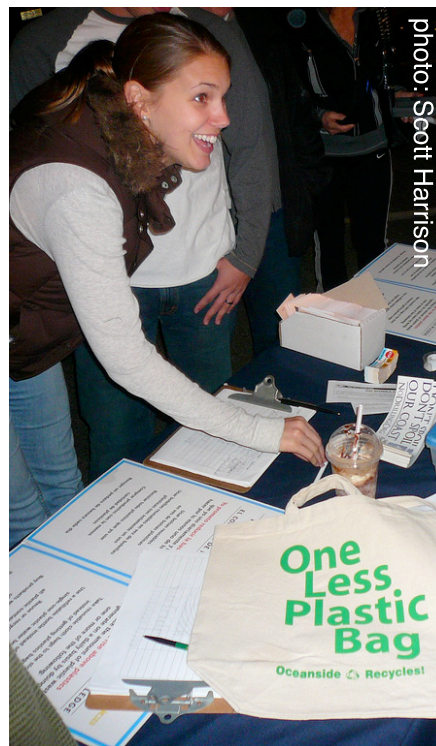
Surfrider beach cleanups are also a great place to drum up support. Take photos and track what you collect. (The resources section includes a sample data card). Educate participants about the ordinance, have them sign petitions and volunteer as Rise Above Plastics core volunteers.

Another great community tool is to host a “Bag It” film screening and invite your city council members or other decision makers for a discussion after the film.

Other ideas to build support include hosting awareness events or informational meetings, hosting an info table at other community events, using public media outlets (letters to the editor, press releases), newsletters to supporters and friends, social media, petitions, etc.

Are other groups in your community working on the issue or possibly interested in working on it? Reach out to them to form coalitions when possible so you can show a broad group of supporters and can divvy up some of the planning aspects. Having a variety of groups supporting any ordinance or bill is beneficial. Reaching out to schools, social justice groups and other environmental groups can be helpful.

*More info on film screenings and other outreach tools is in the Plastic Reduction Resources section.*







### Step 5) Know your opposition.

The most vocal opponent to bag ordinances have been trade organizations for the U.S. plastics industry. It is likely they will be at your hearings to speak out against any plastics ordinance. One of their main arguments is that recycling is the answer and they point to large increases in plastic bag recycling rates – but they also avoid mentioning that the overall plastic bag recycling rates are still quite low. Check into plastic bag recycling in your community to find local statistics and see this [Coastal Blog entry](#) for rebuttals to common industry claims.

Grocers often oppose local carryout bag ordinances but support statewide bills because they offer a level playing field compared to a patchwork of ordinances. Others may oppose a bag ordinance because they claim that it limits people's right to choose or that placing a fee on bags is the same as a new tax. The cost of bags is currently absorbed in your retail prices. A bag fee would help externalize those costs and possibly lower prices slightly over time, especially as the cost of bags rises.

Other common arguments are that bag ordinances are job killers, paper bags are worse for the environment and reusable bags are dirty. In response, highlight the closest reusable bag makers to your community and mention the potential green jobs. If reusable bags get dirty, simply wash and dry them.



### Step 6) Rock the vote.

OK, the saying is a bit cliché but still important. Decision makers want to hear from their constituents so when you know an important vote is coming up, it is essential to rally support. Ask the City Attorney to email you when any public meetings/hearings are announced or be sure to get that info from your sponsor on City Council.

- **Create an online action alert so that people can easily email and/or call the city council members and other decision makers. Surfrider can help you craft an effective action alert.**
- **Execute a phone tree to call people in your community to let them know about the upcoming vote and encourage them to attend the public hearing.**
- **Update your Facebook and/or other social media pages to recruit new supporters, keep people informed and mobilize them for the vote.**
- **Reach out to schools and other local groups that may be able to boost your impact at the public hearing.**

At the city council meeting or hearing, it's important to have all of your supporters be accounted for. If you have fewer than ten supporters, try to have each one make a short statement of support during the public comment position. (Sometimes you need to fill out a speaker slip in advance, whereas other places simply have people line up to speak at a certain time for each agenda item.) It's good to have a variety of views and reasons for the decision makers to vote 'yes'. Remember to keep the reasons local when possible.

There's often a two or three minute time limit on each public speaker. If people are a bit intimidated by public speaking, a short, "I support this ordinance and ask you to also" is effective. If you have a large group in the crowd, it's probably beneficial to have one of the group leaders state, "I represent X people here tonight" and have them briefly stand up as part of the testimony. In your allotted time, clearly state your main points and try to provide a rebuttal to the top claim or two from the opposition. Ask supporters to bring a reusable bag and/or wear a specific color such as blue or green. If you have multiple speakers, have each person focus on one or two main arguments or local aspects. Avoid being repetitive.

Regardless of the outcome, be gracious, especially since reporters may be there for interviews after the city council meeting. It's good to have a press release prepared in advance when possible and be sure to have a designated Surfrider Foundation representative for media interviews. If you win and your ordinance is adopted, try to work with the community to hand out free reusable bags when it takes effect. If you lose and the ordinance is voted down, regroup with your supporters to determine if it can be brought back successfully or if it's better to pursue other plastic reduction efforts.





## NOW IT'S IN YOUR HANDS !!!

You have the tools and resources to help prevent plastic pollution and overconsumption, what are you going to do with them? Contact your local Surfrider Chapter to see what initiatives they are working on locally and visit [www.surfrider.org/RAP](http://www.surfrider.org/RAP) for the most current version of this toolkit, current Plastic Reduction Resources and current ways to Rise Above Plastics!







Rise Above Plastics is a Surfrider Foundation program. The Surfrider Foundation is a non-profit grassroots organization dedicated to the protection and enjoyment of our world's oceans, waves and beaches through a powerful activist network. Founded in 1984 by a handful of visionary surfers in Malibu, California, the Surfrider Foundation now maintains over 60,000 members and 100 chapters worldwide. For more information on the Surfrider Foundation, go to:

[www.surfrider.org/RAP](http://www.surfrider.org/RAP) and  
[www.surfrider.org](http://www.surfrider.org)



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