



Russian River Watershed Association

300 Seminary Ave, Ukiah, CA 95482 • (707)833-2553 • www.rrwatershed.org

RRWA Environmental Column – October 2013 Reusable Carryout Bags – Who Needs Them?

In short, we all need to use reusable carryout bags. It's good for you and for the environment.

Why do we need reusable carryout bags?

Scientific evidence has shown that the use of all single-use shopping bags (plastic, paper, biodegradable) has severe environmental impacts, including greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, litter, harm to wildlife, water consumption and solid waste generation. Many of these single-use carryout bags are made from plastic or other material that does not readily decompose. Billions of single-use plastic bags are used annually in California but only a small percentage are actually recycled. Studies have documented the prevalence of single-use plastic carryout bags littering the environment, blocking storm drains and fouling beaches. Typically, taxpayers must incur clean-up costs associated with discarded single-use plastic bags. Of all single-use bags, plastic bags have the greatest impacts on marine life and litter in general. From an overall environmental and economic perspective, the best alternative to single-use plastic and paper carryout bags is a shift to reusable bags.

Plastic bags have been found in the Russian River which flows to the Pacific Ocean. The use of plastic bags in our watershed is harmful to marine animals and birds which confuse plastic fragments for a source of food resulting in injury and death.

The Ocean Conservancy reported that the most commonly found pieces of trash found during coastal cleanups were things we use every day, including plastic bags. Locally, the Ukiah Friends of Gibson Creek, a creek advocacy group, conducted a four-hour clean-up of a one-mile stretch of Gibson Creek and retrieved 241 plastic bags!

Since January 2013 Ukiah, Fort Bragg, and unincorporated Mendocino County have banned supermarkets and large drug stores from providing plastic carryout bags at the checkout stand. This ban will extend to other retail stores in 2014. A similar effort is underway in Sonoma County, where a countywide ordinance has been proposed and an environmental impact report has been completed.

What can we do?

Purchase reusable carryout bags and take the bags with you each and every time you go to the store. Reusable carryout bags are readily available. Find bags that match your style. You'll use your bags more if you enjoy them. Some local residents have been using reusable bags for the past 25 years. The advantage of cotton and polyester reusable bags is that they can easily be washed with a load of laundry. Some reusable bags are made with an insulated layer and a closeable top. This helps when transporting perishable and frozen foods on hot days.

Where should we keep reusable carryout bags? Tips for remembering your bag when shopping

Make reusable bags a regular part of your shopping routine, soon it will be habit. Reusable carryout bags are best kept in your car or bike bag if you are a two-wheel "driver". Then you will always have a bag or two with you when you go to the store. Another handy place is to hang reusable bags by your back door



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so you see and grab them when you are leaving for the store. Put your kids in charge of remembering. Many stores refund a few cents per bag. Offer to pay this amount to your kids for reminding you.

What are the benefits of reusable carryout bags?

You can help eliminate single use shopping bags which are a significant contributor to local litter and the associated aesthetic impact to the community.

You will reduce the impacts to animals locally and regionally by helping to eliminate single use shopping bags which studies show wildlife mistake for a food source, eat, and become injured and even die.

By using reusable carryout bags you can do your part to reduce pollution thereby maintaining clean and healthy waterways.

This article was authored by Rick Seanor of the City of Ukiah, on behalf of RRWA. RRWA (www.rrwatershed.org) is an association of local public agencies in the Russian River Watershed that have come together to coordinate regional programs for clean water, fisheries restoration, and watershed enhancement.