



Russian River Watershed Association

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

RRWA Environmental Column – April 2012 Carryout Bags: Convenience with Consequences

You don't have to venture too far to find a runaway plastic bag littering our environment. Although they are convenient to use and very functional, most plastic bags are designed for one-time use only. Consumers don't always reuse their plastic bags and rarely recycle them.

According to the latest statistic available from the US Environmental Protection Agency, it is estimated that only 9.8% of plastic bags are recovered. Where are the rest ending up?

Once they have served their single-use purpose, many plastic bags end up in the landfill, but others work their way into our environment. Even when placed in proper bins for disposal or recycling, plastic bags can become airborne. From there, they often become litter or get entangled with landfill and recycling center equipment, requiring costly equipment repairs or work stoppage to clear the entanglement.

Once they become litter, plastic bags find their way into our streets, parks, waterways, beaches, and eventually to the ocean. This litter is unsightly, contributes to urban blight, clogs storm drains, adds to increasing municipal costs, and is a threat to wildlife. Trash in urban creeks and water bodies impairs beneficial uses, such as recreation and wildlife habitat. In the Russian River watershed of Sonoma and Mendocino counties, these waterways drain to the Pacific Ocean.

Plastic bags are made from petroleum and do not biodegrade. Plastics take hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of years to break down in most environments. Light breaks them down into smaller and smaller particles that contaminate the soil and water.

Plastic bags pose a serious danger to birds and marine mammals that often mistake them for food or become entangled in the bags. Many die each year after swallowing or choking on discarded plastic bags. When the bird, mammal, or other creature decomposes, the plastic is re-released into the environment.

The Ocean Conservancy's "Tracking Trash – 25 Year of Action for the Ocean" report found that plastic bags were the sixth most common debris item collected worldwide over the past 25 years. The 2010 International Coastal Cleanup (ICC) report, produced by the Ocean Conservancy, found that plastic bags were the third most common debris item collected worldwide during the annual one-day coastal cleanup event. This suggests that plastic bag litter is increasing. Cigarettes and cigarette filters were the most common item found during the cleanup and plastic beverage bottles were the second.

The impacts of plastic bag pollution have ignited a global movement to reduce the use of single-use plastic bags. In California, many communities are either considering a ban on single-use plastic bags or have already implemented a ban.



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Some stores have stopped offering their customers single-use plastic bags. We all can do our part to slow down this problem. Consider switching to reusable shopping bags instead of using single-use plastic bags. Many retailers are now selling reusable bags in their stores, and often, the bags can be purchased for less than a dollar. Other stores are offering incentives to customers who bring in their own bags.

If you do end up with single-use plastic bags, be sure to reuse them when possible or recycle them. California law requires all supermarkets and large retailers with pharmacies to take back and recycle plastic grocery bags. Many stores throughout Sonoma and Mendocino counties provide marked boxes for plastic bag recycling. Others will take back plastic bags in their lobbies or at customer service centers. In Sonoma County, plastic bags can also be placed in the blue curbside recycling bins. When bundling the bags, be sure they are placed in a clear plastic bag so the contents can be viewed. Unfortunately, due to contamination, the plastic bag recovery rate is low.

Using reusable bags instead of single use plastic bags and properly recycling plastic bags are the first steps you can take to protect our waterways, wildlife, and the environment.

This article was authored by Lisa Steinman of the Sonoma County Waste Management Agency, 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.



The journey of a cigarette butt: from roads to rivers and beaches