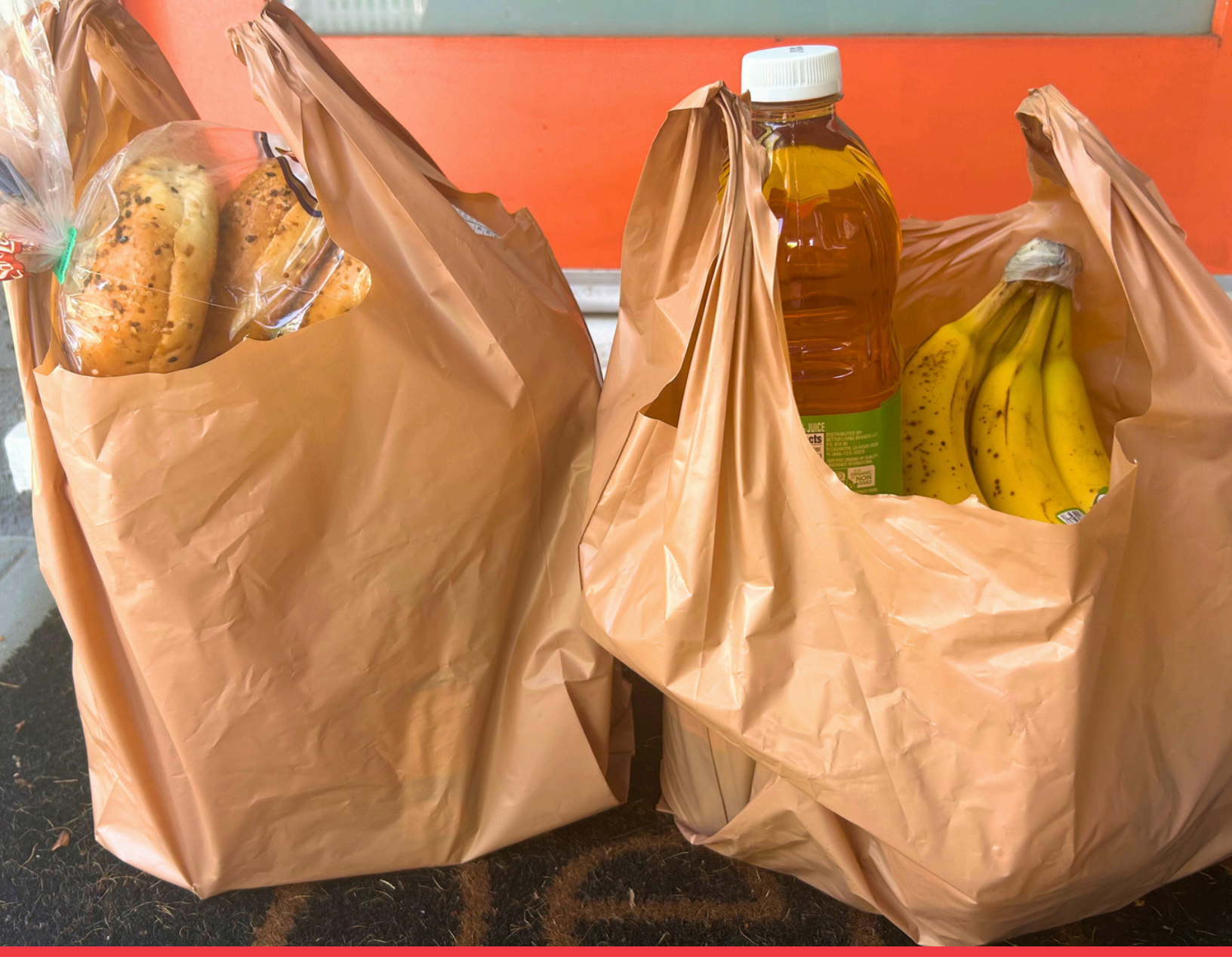

THE PROBLEM WITH "REUSABLE" PLASTIC BAGS

A Survey On The Bags Customers Use At Grocery Stores

CALPIRG

The Problem with “Reusable” Plastic Bags

A SURVEY ON THE BAGS CUSTOMERS USE AT THE GROCERY STORE

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Executive Summary

FROM PRODUCTION TO DISPOSAL, plastic bag waste threatens the environment and our health.

Plastics are primarily made from fossil fuels, so producing plastic bags requires drilling for oil.[1] Extracting and refining fossil fuels to make plastic bags releases toxic substances into the air, including known carcinogens and neurotoxins.[2]

When plastics make it to a landfill, they do not biodegrade, but can leach toxic chemicals into the ground, damaging our soil quality and contaminating our groundwater.[3] The plastic bags that don't get to a landfill often end up littering the environment. As plastic breaks down in the environment, it breaks into smaller pieces called microplastics. Microplastics are now found nearly everywhere, from the top of Mt. Everest to the bottom of the Mariana Trench and even inside our bodies.[4,5,6]

Californians know plastic bag waste is bad. That's why the California State Legislature voted to ban plastic bags in 2014 with Senate Bill 270, and Californians defended that ban at the ballot box in 2016, winning by nearly 6 points.[7]

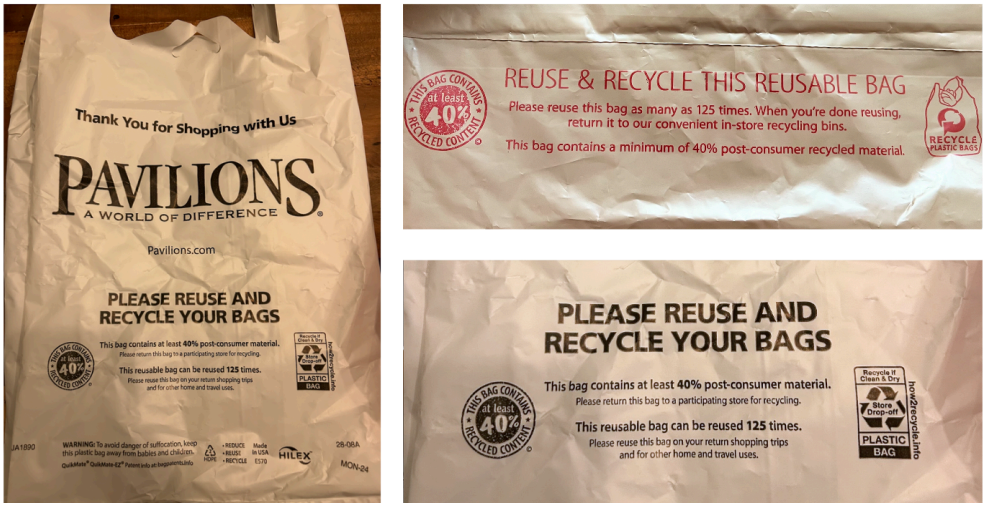
Unfortunately, the law banning plastic bags allowed grocery stores to still provide plastic bags so long as they are recyclable and reusable. The plastic industry exploited the law and started mass-producing slightly thicker plastic bags that they claim are reusable and recyclable. But the reality is that most of these bags are not reused or recycled statewide. In fact, the Los Angeles Times reached out to municipal and city recycling centers around the state and was unable to find a single one that accepts them. [8] CalRecyle even told The Times, "Plastic bags aren't recycled on a large scale in California."[9]

In 2024, CALPIRG conducted a survey of the types of bags customers carry into and out of grocery stores. We conducted this survey at 13 stores in 6 California cities, surveying more than 530 grocery store patrons. We found that **despite plastic bag producers' advertising that their bags are reusable, few customers seem to be reusing these plastic bags at grocery stores.**

Only about 2% of the observed patrons visibly carried plastic bags into the grocery store to use for their grocery shopping.

The survey data suggests that the intent of SB 270, to reduce plastic pollution, has been lost. Although the plastic industry advertises their bags as reusable up to 125 times (see photos below), our survey shows that few people are actually reusing them. Rather, these plastic bags are likely being thrown out after only one more use, often as trash can liners, or ending up immediately in our waste stream. According to state waste data, plastic bag waste by weight has soared to an all-time high. In 2021 alone, Californians threw away over 231,000 tons of plastic bags.[10]

To address this issue, the legislature is considering two identical bills, Senate Bill 1053 and Assembly Bill 2236, that would fix this problem by banning the sale of plastic bags at grocery store checkout and allowing only recycled paper bags to be provided with a fee. With these bills, California has the power to amend the law to achieve what voters have indicated they wanted since 2016: plastic bag-free checkout lanes. Given that California is the most populous state in the nation, cutting plastic grocery bags in the state will significantly reduce the flow of plastic waste into our environment and curtail the need to create more plastic. Nothing that we use for a few minutes should pollute the environment for centuries.



Although the plastic industry labels their bags as reusable, our survey shows that few people are actually reusing them. (Credit: Staff)

Key Findings

VOLUNTEERS WITH CALPIRG STOOD outside grocery stores around California and counted the number of people who came into the store with bags, both "reusable" plastic bags and more traditional tote bags that are genuinely designed to be reusable, as well as the number of people who walked out with plastic, paper, or their own bags. A small number of customers, constituting a minor fraction of the total observed population, were double-counted because they exited the store with both tote and plastic bags. The findings represent a snapshot in time, and the customers counted entering the store are not necessarily the customers counted exiting the store.

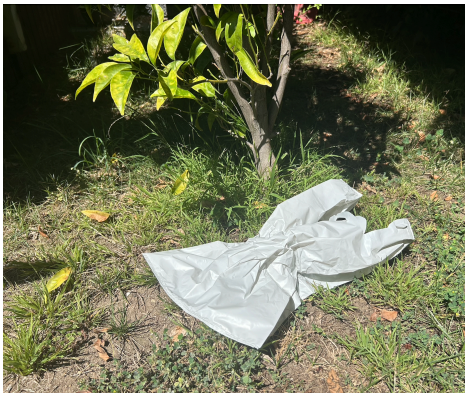
This report has three main findings:

Very few customers are bringing in plastic bags to reuse.

- While 46% of observed customers exiting the store (331 of 721) carried plastic bags, only 2% of observed customers entering the store (11 of 530) carried plastic bags.

  This data indicates that while customers are using plastic bags to transport their groceries home, very few are bringing them back to reuse them again. As we suspected, most grocery store plastic bags are not being reused multiple times, but instead likely become waste after their original use.

We asked a few customers who carried out groceries in plastic bags whether or not they intended to reuse those bags, and only 2 of the 11 people polled said they planned to reuse their plastic grocery bags. And one of the two customers indicated they would only reuse the bag one more time, as a trash can liner. This reuse practice only delays the plastic from going to a landfill, and does not prevent the need for more plastic bags to be made.

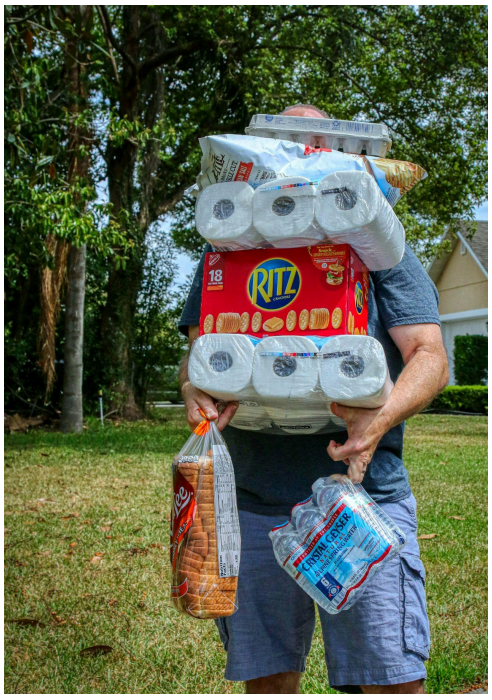


Plastic bags quickly become waste and litter our environment. (Credit: Staff)

Some customers opted to carry out their items in their hands, even when a disposable option was available.

- Over 28% of observed customers exiting the store (203 of 721) carried their purchases without a bag.

  The decision to carry out their purchases in their hands rather than in a single-use bag may indicate their aversion to the waste inherent to single-use bags, the cost of a bag, or both.



Many of the observed customers who didn't bring reusable tote bags to the store carried their purchases out in their hands, likely to avoid the waste or the cost of plastic bags. (Credit: Mick Haupt via Unsplash)

Many stores only offer plastic bags.

- 62% of stores (8 of 13) surveyed did not have a paper bag option.

  California's grocery stores can broadly decide what types of bags to offer at checkout. Our survey data suggests many are choosing to only provide plastic bags, which – unlike paper bags – are not widely recyclable and are bad for the environment and public health.

  In two of the stores that provided both plastic and paper bags, both baggers did not ask the surveyor's preference and automatically used plastic.

Conclusion: Common plastic bag use doesn't live up to industry claims

WHEN VOTERS PASSED PROPOSITION 67 to ban plastic bags, they were presumably voting to support the proponent's stated goal: "to reduce litter, protect our ocean and wildlife, and reduce clean-up costs."[11]

But the plastic industry's proliferation of thicker plastic bags has thwarted this goal. Though they may technically be usable up to 125 times, they are rarely used that way. Only about 2% of surveyed customers returned to the store with such a plastic bag.

Plastic bags are also not recyclable on a broad scale in the state.

The Los Angeles Times was unable to find a single municipal or city recycling center across the state that accepts plastic grocery bags.[12]

Many stores have specific bins for returning plastic bags for recycling, but when ABC News placed trackers into 46 plastic bags and deposited them at plastic bag recycling bins at Target and Walmart, after months, only four made it to locations associated with plastic bag recycling.[13] In fact, half ended up at landfills or trash incinerators.[14] After public records requests, it was later found that the four that made their way to facilities involved in plastic bag recycling were most likely either trashed domestically or exported abroad.[15]

Best case scenario, some plastic bags that are collected in store drop-off bins labeled recycling could make it to a location that downcycles plastic film into other types of nonrecyclable plastic goods, like plastic benches or decks.[16] This downcycling, turning an item into a non-recyclable item, does not reduce the need to produce more plastic to make plastic grocery bags.

Considering these factors, it is not surprising that California's plastic bag waste by weight has reached an all-time high.[17]

Policy Recommendations

IT'S CLEAR THAT CALIFORNIA'S plastic bag ban isn't working as intended. It's safe to conclude that most plastic grocery bags are not being regularly reused or recycled, leading to more plastic bag waste than ever.

To address this problem, California must pass a true plastic grocery bag ban. The legislature should pass SB 1053 and AB 2236, two identical bills that will improve the current law by banning the sale of plastic bags at checkout and provisioning the sale of paper bags only. These bills will grant Californians the outcome they've supported since 2016: plastic bag-free checkout lanes.

And California shouldn't stop there. Much more can be done to turn off the plastic bag waste tap. California should also prohibit retailers and restaurants from providing plastic bags at checkout. Some California cities, including Los Angeles, have already begun taking on plastic bag waste at these venues, and the state should too.[18]

Ultimately, the state should be doing all it can to encourage less toxic options that are truly recyclable and reusable.

Appendix I: Methodology

This survey was conducted in the summer of 2024 at the following 13 grocery stores.

Store	Street Address	City	Zip
Albertsons	2035 Hillhurst Ave	Los Angeles	90027
Ralphs	3827 Culver Center St	Culver City	90232
Ralphs	11361 National Blvd	Los Angeles	90064
Ralphs	8657 Villa La Jolla Dr	La Jolla	92037
Safeway	6310 College Ave	Oakland	94618
Safeway	5100 Broadway Ave	Oakland	94611
Sprouts	2735 Marconi Ave	Sacramento	95821
Target	10820 Jefferson Blvd	Culver City	90230
Target	125 Shoreline Parkway	San Rafael	94901
Vons	3118 S Sepulveda Blvd	Los Angeles	90034
Vons	4520 Sunset Blvd	Los Angeles	90027
Walmart	2700 Marconi Ave	Sacramento	95821
Whole Foods	8825 Villa La Jolla Dr	La Jolla	92037

Surveyor Instructions

Surveyors were asked to observe grocery store entry and exit for a roughly 30-minute period. They were asked to count the number of people entering and exiting and track the types of bags they carried into and out of the store. The surveyors were asked to classify grocery store patrons' bag usage into four categories: paper, plastic, traditional reusable, or none. Traditional reusable bags do not include the thicker plastic bags sold for ten cents at checkout, but rather are bags with woven handles, like tote bags.

Surveyors were also asked to determine which types of bags the store had at checkout. When possible, surveyors were asked to go through the check-out line to assess how the cashier and baggers navigated the bagging options and take note of the interaction.

Additionally, surveyors were instructed to ask a few shoppers exiting the store with plastic bags if they intended to reuse them. If shoppers responded "yes," surveyors were instructed to ask the shopper if they intended to reuse it more than once.

Finally, surveyors were also asked to take note of the store address where they conducted the survey.

Appendix II: Summary of Results

Observed customers entering stores by bag type:

Plastic	Paper	Traditional Reusable	Nothing	Total In
11	7	132	380	530

Observed customers* exiting stores by bag type:

Plastic	Paper	Traditional Reusable	Nothing	Total Out
331	42	145	203	721

*Note: A small number of customers, constituting a minor fraction of the total observed population, were double-counted because they exited the store with both reusable and plastic bags.

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