

## PLASTIC BAG FACT SHEET

### How many plastic shopping bags do Australians use?

Australians used around 5.6 billion single-use plastic shopping bags in 2004. That's almost one bag for every person in Australia every day of the year! Although we have reduced our use of plastic shopping bags since 2002 by around 19.4%, we still use a lot of bags!

### Why are plastic bags an environmental problem?

Plastic bags are a problem in our environment for a number of reasons:

- Around 80 million plastic shopping bags end up as litter in our environment each year.
- It takes plastic bags up to 1,000 years to break down and, because they are lightweight and moisture resistant, they can travel long distances and cause environmental problems in many places.
- Plastic bags can be hazardous to wildlife, potentially entangling animals or being mistaken for food. The World Wide Fund for Nature estimates that over 100,000 whales, seals, turtles, and birds die every year as a result of plastic bags.
- On land, plastic bag litter can block drains, trap birds and kill livestock. One farmer in NSW found 8 plastic bags in the stomach of a dead calf.
- Plastics are made from non-renewable natural resources such as crude oil, gas and coal. The 5.6 billion bags we used in Australia in 2004 could have driven a car approximately 644 million kilometres!

### Can plastic bags be recycled?

The High Density Polyethylene (HDPE) plastic shopping bags used in supermarkets and other retailers can be recycled by taking them back to the supermarket for collection. However, only around 3% of these bags are recycled each year. The thicker Low Density Polyethylene (LDPE) bags used mostly in department and boutique stores are not currently recycled through the supermarket schemes. Biodegradable are made of different chemicals to non-degradable plastic shopping bags and should also not be placed in supermarket plastic bag recycling bins. Plastic bags cannot be placed in your kerbside recycling bin and in many council areas, plastic bags are the main contaminant of kerbside recycling.

### What do Australians think about plastic bags?

A 2004 study commissioned by Planet Ark found that 93% of Australians questioned were concerned about the impact that plastic bags had on the environment and 50% were particularly concerned about the impact of plastic bags on wildlife.

### What is the Australian government doing to reduce plastic check-out bags?

The Federal Government and the Australian Retailers Association (ARA) agreed to reduce plastic shopping bag usage 50 per cent by the end of 2005. The ARA recently reported a mid-2005 reduction of 33.8% in plastic shopping bag usage by supermarket retailers, and believe they are on track to reach the 50% target. Retail industry bodies are now working with governments through the Environment Protection and Heritage Council (EPHC) to develop a phase-out agreement. This will set out further plastic bag reduction targets and put into place a strategy for when the current Code of Practice expires.

### Why should I pay for a reusable bag if I can get a plastic bag for free?

Plastic bags are not free to consumers - the cost is hidden in the price of your groceries, as well as in your rates and taxes due to the cost of picking them up as litter. Reusable bags do cost more to purchase and this cost is often more than most retail

outlets can absorb. Paying a small amount for reusable bags will also encourage you to remember them when you go shopping and will last a long time, making them a sound investment for you and the environment.

### **Where can I get a reusable bag for my shopping?**

If you live in a community undertaking the Plastic Bag Free Challenge, look out for the 'Plastic Bags... Just Say NO' reusable bags. Alternatively, you can buy reusable bags at all leading supermarkets.

### **What are the benefits of using a reusable bag?**

Reusable bags:

- hold around twice as many items as plastic bags.
- are easier to carry as they have more comfortable handles.
- won't burst under the weight of heavy shopping items such as tins or soft drinks.
- reduce the number of plastic bags that are produced, recycled and disposed of.
- don't pose a threat to wildlife.

### **What can I use for my garbage bin instead of reusing my plastic shopping bags?**

Despite a 90% reduction in plastic shopping bag use in Ireland after a levy was introduced and a 77% increase in kitchen bin liner sales as a result, there was still an **overall reduction** of over 1.08 billion plastic bags a year. If this happened in Australia, plastic shopping bags would be reduced by over 5 billion bags every year!

There are a number of alternatives to using plastic shopping bags in your bin. Try lining it with old newspaper or don't use a bin liner at all – ring your local council to make sure this is OK. If possible, use a compost bin or worm farm for your food and garden waste - this can reduce the amount of waste in your rubbish bin by up to 50% and takes out the 'wet' waste that makes your bin dirty.

### **What can I use to pick up dog poo instead of reusing my shopping bags?**

Picking up after your dog is very important as dog poo left on the street ends up in our waterways, contributing to *E. coli* pollution and possibly passing roundworm onto humans. Many people use their plastic shopping bags to pick up their dog poo, but there are many other plastic bags that come into our lives that are also suitable for picking up dog poo. Bread bags, fruit and veggie bags, chip bags, dog food bags, pasta bags... the list is almost endless! Alternatively, you could try using newspaper or a pooper scooper, with your dog poo then going straight into the compost bin.

### **What about biodegradable plastic bags?**

While biodegradable plastic shopping bags might seem like a good idea, there are a number of problems associated with them.

- Many bags that claim to break down naturally actually don't and there is currently no national standard to verify this.
- Using biodegradable shopping bags may promote littering as people think the bags will break down in the environment no matter how they are disposed of.
- Until biodegradable products actually break down they still pose the same danger as non-biodegradable plastic bags and hence have the same short term potential to harm wildlife and create litter problems as non-biodegradable products.
- Even if biodegradable bags do break down it is not known, at this stage, what is left over once the biodegradation takes place. These leftover pieces could be just as harmful as plastic bags if ingested by animals.
- Biodegradable bags also require energy, water and resources in their production and are still used only once, so substituting the habit of using billions of shopping bags with billions of biodegradable bags isn't a great environmental outcome!