



Plastic bag reduction around the world

Different countries around the world have taken a range of actions to reduce plastic bag consumption. Here is a snapshot of how countries are tackling the issue, including actions initiated in Australia. Approaches vary from voluntary measures and education campaigns between consumers and retailers, through to levies on plastic bags payable by retailers or consumers and bans on plastic bags.

- South Africa
- Australia
- Bangladesh
- China
- India
- Hong Kong
- New Zealand
- Taiwan
- Denmark
- France
- Germany
- Israel
- Italy
- Macedonia
- Republic of Ireland
- United Kingdom
- United Arab Emirates
- Canada
- Mexico
- United States

Africa

South Africa

In 2003, South Africa banned the use of High Density Polyethylene (HDPE) plastic bags, which are the thinner plastic bags (less than 30 micrometer thick - by comparison, a human hair measures about 50 micrometer across). Additionally, a levy on the thicker plastic bags was imposed*. The new law allows retailers to sell plastic bags but not distribute the bags for free.

Eritrea, Rwandan and Somalia (Somaliland, an autonomous territory of Somalia) banned plastic bags in 2005. Tanzania (including Zanzibar, a semi-autonomous territory of Tanzania) introduced this approach in 2006. Kenya and Uganda imposed the same laws in 2007.

* It is common for the thinner plastic bags (HDPE) to be banned first, as these are more extensively used than the thicker, boutique style plastic bags (the Low Density Polyethylene (LDPE) plastic bags). Thick bags are very expensive and not many retailers can afford to supply them. In addition, they are stronger and can be more easily reused. Thin bags, on the other hand, are of very poor quality and can rarely be reused. These bags are more of a threat to wildlife, as they easily confuse the bags for food. HDPE bags end up in the environment blocking drains, killing marine wildlife and forming long lasting toxic pollution in landfill.

Asia-Pacific

Australia

South Australia was the first state to ban HDPE plastic bags in 2009, as a response to the state government's "Zero Waste" policy. Retailers may be fined if they sell or give away plastic bags made from polyethylene polymer less than 35 micrometer thick. The Northern Territory government has announced it will ban plastic bags in 2011. The shops will be forbidden to sell or give away non-biodegradable lightweight plastic bags.

There are also a number of individual towns in other states of Australia that have banned plastic bags. Coles Bay in Tasmania was the first town to prohibit plastic bags in 2003. Retailers are now offered recycled paper bags or reusable fabric bags for a fee. This initiative was established in order to protect whales that migrate to Coles Bay and can ingest plastic bags confusing it for food.

In Victoria, Birregurra, Cannons, Creek, Murtoa, Metung, Timboon, Cohuna and Leitchville introduced the same initiative as Coles Bay. In New South Wales, Kangaroo Valley, Huskisson, Oyster Bay, Mogo and Orient Point have all banned plastic bags. Finally, communities in Northern Territory that have banned plastic bags include Milikapati, Wadeye and Lajamanu and the town of Yulara (near Uluru).

In addition, facilities for collection of plastic bags for recycling are provided within supermarkets around Australia.

Bangladesh

Bangladesh was one of the first countries to ban plastic bags. This initiative was a consequence of the country's major flooding in 1998 when plastic bag litter blocked drains preventing the escape of water and alerted the government to take action. The plastic bag ban led to the alternative bag use, especially jute bags. Jute bags are made from jute plants that grow abundantly in Bangladesh. They are one of the most environmentally friendly alternatives to plastic bags - they are biodegradable and require less energy for processing than polyethylene bags.

China

In 2008, China introduced a ban on the production, distribution and use of the HDPE bags. In addition, retailers are allowed to charge consumers for the LDPE plastic bags with a thickness greater than 0.025 micrometers. It is estimated that plastic bags consumption has reduced significantly as a result.

India

In 2002, India declared that all plastic bags used must be greater than 20 micrometers in thickness. This initiative was implemented in order to prevent plastic bags from clogging of the municipal drainage systems and to prevent the sacred cows of India ingesting plastic bags as they confuse it for food. The local governments of Mumbai, Chandigar and Maharashtra banned the use of plastic bags in 2000, 2002 and 2005 respectively.

Hong Kong

This country has implemented an education campaign called 'No plastic bag, please' and forbid retailers over a specified size from providing bags to customers free of charge. In addition, facilities for collection of plastic bags for recycling are provided within supermarkets.

New Zealand

In 2009, a number of retailers implemented levies on plastic bags as a result of community concern. In addition, Christchurch City Council collects plastic shopping bags from the kerbside as part of their recycling collection service.

Taiwan

In 2003, Taiwan banned free distribution of light-weight plastic bags (thickness less than 0.06 millimetres) and established an environmental levy at the retail level.

Europe and the Middle East

Denmark

In 1994, Denmark established a tax on plastic and paper bags paid by retailers. Therefore, retailers strongly promote the use of reusable bags. As a result, the use of plastic bags has been reduced by one third.

France

In the French Island Corsica, plastic bags have been banned in large stores since 1999. Paris banned the use of non-biodegradable plastic bags in large stores in 2007.

Germany

In Germany, all stores that provide plastic bags must pay a recycling fee to the government for enhancing recycling programs. As a result, retailers charge between 5 and 10 cents per single-use bag depending on the type of bag.

Israel

Israel introduced a levy on plastic bags in 2008 in order to fund the provision of reusable bags as part of an education campaign.

Italy

Between 1989 and 1992, Italy introduced a tax on plastic bags, but the tax was minimal (0.0051 Euro per bag or AUS 0.007cents) and it did not have an impact on plastic bag consumption. Italy is now in the process of introducing a ban on the use of non-biodegradable plastic bags.

Macedonia

In 2009, Macedonia banned plastic bags from markets, retail and food sectors. The minimum thickness of bags that can be used and purchased is 21 micrometers and only for items weighing more than 5 kilograms. This law was established in order to reduce excessive use and improper

disposal of plastic bags, and eliminate the public-health problems of carcinogenic emission from burning plastic bags.

Republic of Ireland

Ireland was the first country to tax plastic shopping bags. It introduced a 15 Euro cent (AUS 0.27cents) tax on plastic shopping bags in 2002. The aim of the levy was to change consumer behaviours, which is why the tax was targeted at consumers rather than retailers. In 2007, the tax was increased to 22 Euro cents (AUS 0.30 cents) per bag, which led to a moderate decrease of plastic bag consumption. Currently the Irish government plans to double the tax to further reduce plastic bag consumption.

The effect of the tax on the use of plastic bags in the retail sector has resulted in a dramatic decrease in plastic bag consumption and a substantial increase in the use of reusable bags.

United Kingdom

UK settled a voluntary agreement between the government and retailers to cut the use of plastic bags given out in 2009 compared to figures recorded for 2006. This action helped reduce the use of plastic bags in UK considerably. This initiative was established in order to reduce the bags that end up in landfill sites.

United Arab Emirates

United Arab Emirates plans to ban plastic bags by the end of 2012. A number of initiatives have been implemented in different cities to help people with the transition. For example, Ajman has prohibited the production of non-biodegradable bags.

The Americas

Canada

The municipality of Leaf Rapids (Manitoba, Canada) and Huntingdon (Quebec) both banned plastic shopping bags. Northwest Territories introduced a mandatory 25 cent charge on all paper and plastic bags in all grocery stores in 2010. Meanwhile, Toronto Council approved a 5 cent charge for each bag used by customers in grocery and retail stores. Additionally, in many areas of Canada, plastics bags are included in the kerbside recycling collection.

Mexico

Mexico City approved a law to ban the use of non-biodegradable plastic bags in 2009.

United States

San Francisco became the first city to introduce a ban on pharmacies and large supermarkets distributing non-biodegradable plastic bags in 2007, while the rest of California approved a law requiring supermarkets to take back plastic bags from consumers and ensure recycling.

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