Plastic Bag Problem: Recycling Plastic Bags

So what do we do with the plastic bags we already have after they are worn out and can’t be reused as bags anymore? Recycling options do exist. But recycling plastic bags is problematic. First of all, most municipalities don’t allow them in curbside programs because they clog up the sorting machines when mixed with other recyclables, a phenomenon I witnessed firsthand during my visit to a California recycling center. So to recycle them, you have to bring them back to the store or recycling center. In 2007, the State of California mandated that all supermarkets and large retail stores with a pharmacy provide plastic bag drop off bins to collect bags for recycling. But the program is not working. In 2009, California stores collected back only 3 percent of the bags they handed out. Where are the rest? You can’t convince me that 97 percent of the 53,000 tons of plastic bags handed out in California that year were used to line trash cans and pick up poop. My guess is that a lot of those bags are blowing in the wind.

So what happens to the bags that we do bring back for recycling? Like most of our plastic recycling these days, the majority of plastic bags and other film are exported to China. Of the bags that are recycled domestically, the bulk are sold to a company called Trex, which manufactures composite lumber out of recycled plastic film, scrap wood, and sawdust. But recycling plastics bags into plastic lumber is actually downcycling because it doesn’t reduce the demand for brand new plastic bags and because Trex lumber cannot be further recycled. Once Trex wears out, it ends up in the landfill. And while there is a growing demand for recycled plastic bags to be incorporated into garden products, crates, buckets, pallets, and piping, those markets are still very small.

In a truly closed loop system, plastic bags would be recycled into *bags*rather than secondary products. Hilex Poly is one company doing that. Through its Bag-2-Bag collection system, it recovers used plastic bags and incorporates them, along with other types of film and even some jugs and containers, into new plastic bags. In a phone conversation, company spokesperson Phil Rozinski insisted that the only thing stopping Hilex from making bags out of 100 percent recycled material is color. Because of the printing dyes used in plastic bags, you can’t make a white bag out of 100 percent recycled material. So the company encourages retailers to switch to tan or gray bags, which can contain more recycled content.

There is some dispute as to whether plastic bags can actually be made from 100 percent recycled content. But whether they can or not, the real question is whether we need to continue producing more plastic bags in the first place. Whether made from recycled material or not, plastic bags create havoc when let loose in the environment. What’s more, no matter what products we recycle our bags into, the fact is that plastic can only be recycled a finite number of times before it loses tensile strength and must finally be retired. While the same is true for paper, whose fibers get shorter the more they are recycled, paper will biodegrade at the end of its life. Plastic will not. Those huge molecules will still be around long after we’re gone.

So is it wrth it to bring our plastic bags back to the store for recycling? Yes. But not until we’ve gotten as much use out of them as we can. Let’s first reduce the number of new bags we consume in the first place, reuse them as much as possible, and only then bring them back for recycling. Recycling is not a solution to the plastic bag problem. It simply keeps them out of landfills and the environment for a little longer.

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