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Seldom recycled, plastic grocery bags face bans in S.F.

In eliminating petroleum-based bags, San Francisco city leaders hope that retailers will adopt biodegradable ones.

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He says initial cost estimates for compostable bags run five to 10 cents per bag, considerably more than traditional plastic bags, which cost a couple of cents each. The price of corn, the raw material for compostable bags, has risen with rising demand for ethanol.

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Price concerns are echoed by the lone dissenter in Tuesday's 10-1 vote, Supervisor Ed Jew. "It is a regressive tax," he says. "This will probably expand to small businesses, and that's really going to be an economic hardship that will be passed on to consumers."

Supporters, including chief sponsor Ross Mirkarimi, say that the ordinance focuses on large businesses with the expectation that, as bulk purchasers, they will drive down costs

for those bags.

Beyond cost considerations, critics decry the turn away from current recycling efforts. Heylen says the biodegradable bags, if inadvertently placed in store-front recycling bins mandated by the state for petroleum-based bags, will gunk up the recycled material.

But Jared Blumenfeld, director of San Francisco's Department of the Environment, says there isn't anything to gunk up.

"After 10 years, the recycling rate for plastic bags in San Francisco – which is pointed to as a model nationwide – is 1 percent, he says. "So 99 percent failure."

By switching to the compostable bags, Mr. Blumenfeld says the city will be conserving 430,000 gallons of oil used to make traditional bags – the equivalent of keeping 140,000 cars off the street for a day.

There's harsh economics behind bag recycling: It costs \$4,000 to process and recycle 1 ton of plastic bags, which can then be sold on the commodities market for \$32, says Blumenfeld. Other refuse, like aluminum cans, are actually profitable.

With compostable bags, Blumenfeld says, the city should be able to reach its goal of reaching a 75 percent recycling rate – far above the national average of 32 percent.

The scarcity of space for landfills in San Francisco has forced it to be a recycling leader. Other densely populated cities face similar problems, though the nation still has significant landfill capacity, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

With more landfill and less composting, other US locales may not be quick to follow San Francisco's lead. But even if the biodegradable bags aren't fed into a composting system, they have the advantage of dissolving within a matter of months, rather than centuries.

In the meantime, consumers can always bring their own reusable bags – something roughly 1 in 7 customers already does, reckons Duncan

Foley, a bagger at a downtown Safeway supermarket.

Several shoppers there expressed support for the ordinance. "If they can find something biodegradable that's easy to carry, like plastic [is], I'll use it," says Miguel Cornegio, a San Francisco resident. "It's OK if it costs a little more."

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Plastic bag facts

- The US uses 100 billion plastic shopping bags annually, according to The Wall Street Journal.
- An estimated 12 million barrels of oil is required to make that many bags.
- Four of 5 grocery bags in the US are now plastic.
- Plastic bags are among the 12 items of debris most often found incoastal cleanups, according to the Center for Marine Conservation.
- Plastic bags take up to 1,000 years to degrade in a landfill.

Source: Reusablebags.com (a website which sells reusable shopping bags and advocates against plastic bag use)

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