

Sustainability Officer Speaks Out Against Plastic Bag Ban

By Mike Verespej

To Mark Daniels and plastic bag manufacturer Hilex Poly Co. LLC, banning or taxing plastic bags is the wrong public policy answer to reducing litter and solving the risk to the environment from marine debris.

A more common-sense solution is to improve education to consumers and to work with retailers on recycling plastic bags and other film products," said Daniels, vice president of sustainability and environmental policy for the Hartsville, S.C., company. Hilex employs 1,250 and has 30,000 recycling bins in place across the United States, as part of its Bag-2-Bag recycling program that began in 2004.

"Plastic bags are the most environmentally friendly bags," said Daniels in a phone interview March 14, a statement that many environmental groups and some Legislators dispute. "They are 100% recyclable, reusable and toxic-free. More studies are coming out that show that plastic bags have a lower environmental footprint than paper or reusable bags," he said.

In particular, Daniels pointed to a recent life cycle assessment of plastic supermarket bags commissioned by the United Kingdom which found that 76% of lightweight plastic grocery bags have a secondary use, and a U.S. study that found that 90% of plastic bags are reused by consumers.

The U.K. study also found that plastic bags have a lower carbon footprint than alternative paper or reusable bags unless the alternatives are reused multiple times.

"Lightweight single-use carrier bags have the lowest carbon footprint per bag based primarily on resource use and production," said the British Environmental Agency in its report. "Paper, heavyweight plastic and cotton bags all use more resources and energy in their production."

Yet, despite that study and similar lifecycle studies of carryout bags, 19 communities in the U.S. have banned plastic bags and Washington, D.C., has a 5-cent tax on paper and plastic carryout bags. And a number of communities and states have legislative initiatives underway again this year to ban plastic bags, including Oregon, even though that states' Department of Environmental Quality has said the plastic production has a lower carbon footprint than paper bags -- which, according to DEQ, use 17 times more water during production and create five times the pollution.

In addition, Janez Potocnik, environment commissioner for the European Union, announced March 14 that the European Commission will assess the impact of plastic shopping bags on the environment and discuss the possibility of a Europe-wide ban on single-use of plastic bags.

But Daniels contends that plastic bag initiatives often arise for three reasons: - Legislators often have incorrect information and misperceptions about plastic bags and their alternatives.

- Non-government organizations understate the number of plastic bags recycled and don't discuss the fact that they are often reused.
- Grocers are looking to eliminate a cost and replace it with a profit.

"There are a couple of pieces of information that I think Legislators are mistaken on," said Daniels, referring specifically to the initiative underway in Oregon to ban bags. That legislative push prompted Hilex Poly to create a website and launch a radio and newspaper advertising campaign, and place editorial page viewpoints in newspapers around the state.

"A common myth often stated about plastic bags is that they are produced with petroleum in the U.S.," said Daniels. "But about 85% of the plastic grocery bags produced in the U.S. comes from a derivative of natural gas."

"Second, they [legislators] aren't aware that 2 billion of the reusable bags used in the United States come from China and have high levels of metal and lead in them and often are not washed [between uses], creating levels of bacteria," Daniels said.

"In addition, he said the NGOs -- which often lead the way in advocating plastic bag bans -- tend to underestimate the number of plastic bags recycled at one% when the actual number is somewhere between 5-13%, depending on what government statistic is used," Daniels said.

"They [the NGOs] are also not using re-use stats about how people use them to pick up after their pets or as trash can liners and never refer to the fact that the number of purchased plastic trash bags went up 400% after Ireland enacted its tax on plastic bags," continued Daniels.

"When that type of substitution takes place," he argued, "it results in a negative effect on the environment because disposable thin-film grade bags have a lower carbon footprint than heavier gauge-plastic bags."

That is much the same argument that the Save the Plastic Bag Coalition has used in California. It has argued that bans on plastic bags will lead to more use of paper bags, creating a harmful impact on the environment unless there is a large enough fee on paper bags to influence people to use reusable bags.

The other factor driving the proposed ban in Oregon "is political," pointing to the mandate that grocery stores charge shoppers five cents for each paper bag -- a change from the bill that was proposed in Oregon last year.

As currently worded, Oregon SB 536, would require that all retail stores in the state charge at least 5 cents for paper bags they hand out and be allowed to keep a portion of that fee. It also has a provision that would prohibit cities in the state from creating their own carryout bag regulations, after the bill is adopted. The bill is currently in the Senate Environmental and Natural Resources Committee.

Daniels said that switching from plastic to paper bags typically will cost grocery stores somewhere between \$60,000 to \$90,000 annually and contends that the large supermarket chains in Oregon negotiated for language [in SB 536] to allow them to charge for paper bags.

"Grocers are going to eliminate a cost and is going to replace that cost with a profit by selling more reusable bags from China and driving customers to the aisles where their trash bags are sold," Daniels said.

The Northwest Grocers Association responded to Daniels charges. "Hilex Poly and the plastic bags manufacturers in China have put retailers between a rock and a hard place," said Joe Gilliam, president of the Northwest Grocers Association. "The plastic industry sells a cheap bag for about a penny, but has failed to address the litter issue associated with their product."

"The Oregon legislation allows the retailer to break even at the same time the litter issue from plastic bags is addressed. Hilex and others have created their own problem by ignoring the litter they create and relying on smoke screen issues to keep the status quo," Gilliam concluded.

Daniels said Hilex's ad campaigns in Oregon and the Bag the Ban Oregon website are an effort to clarify myths and set forth facts about plastic bags. "We are going to continue to argue with facts," he said. "What we're trying to do is to let them know that recycling is a better approach than bans or fees, and to explain that fees on plastic bags are a regressive tax on those who can least afford them -- that is, people of lesser economic means," Daniels said.

"Those taxes may raise \$2 million" -- the amount that Washington says it collected in the first year it imposed a tax on paper and plastic carryout bags, but that is \$2 million worth of vegetables, meats and fruits that those people could have purchased," Daniels said.

Besides, he said plastic bags account for a small portion of litter. "Plastic bags make up less than 2% of all litter, and 0.5% of the municipal solid waste stream, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency," Daniels said. A recent beach cleanup in Oregon found that plastic bags were only 4% of the litter picked up. The company's Bag The Ban Oregon website called the proposed Oregon an a policy that is not only a waste of time, but [one that] will actually hurt the environment and put our health at risk from reusable bags contaminated with toxic lead and harmful bacteria."

"Hilex is deeply committed to the environment, but Hilex doesn't

agree with the bag-banning [bill in Oregon] as it stands today," the website said. "We are trying to educate consumers," said Daniels, "that a more common sense approach is to improve the educational efforts to educate consumers about recycling bags and other plastic film such as newspaper wraps, garment bags, bread bags and plastic wrap over products such as toilet tissue and paper towels."

He cited the company's partnership with Kroger stores nationwide as an example of what can be done. But he said more of that is needed.

"Plastic bag manufacturers can [and need to] do a better job with signage at grocery stores and work with retailers on in-store public service announcements," Daniels said. "We need visible containers at the front of the store, but it has to be a joint venture with retailers in order to educate consumers."

He also said the plastic bag industry needs to convince more stores to have their checkout clerks remind customers that "if you don't reuse your plastic bags, we have a recycling bin for it and that recycled bag is put back into a plastic bag as recycled content or made into another plastic product."

"On average, Hilex has just under 30% of recycled content in the plastic bags it makes--95% of which are the super-thin bags used at checkout," Daniels said.

He said Hilex Poly will recycle 25 million pounds of plastic films and plastic shopping bags this year at its recycling plant in North Vernon, Ind. That's up from the 20 million pounds of film and bags it recycled in 2010 and the 10 million it recycled in 2009. Daniels said all the plastic film and bags that Hilex recycles are used to make plastic bags.

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Plastics News, a sister publication of Waste & Recycling News.