

# Do Plastic Bag Bans Help or Harm Local Communities?

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*Adapted by Fishtank Staff*



Top view of a landfill in South Tangerang, Indonesia  
"Bird's Eye View Of Landfill" by Tom Fisk is in the Public Domain / Cropped from original

- 1 People in the United States use a lot of plastic bags. On average, every American uses about 365 plastic bags per year. Across the country, that adds up to more than 100 billion plastic bags per year, according to the WorldWatch Institute.
- 2 But that could all change. Many city and state governments have passed laws to reduce the use of plastic bags. In some areas, plastic bag reduction laws require stores to charge an extra fee for every plastic bag used. In others, the laws ban plastic bags entirely.

## **Should State and Local Governments Regulate Plastic Bags?**

- 3 Supporters of plastic bag reduction laws argue that a large number of plastic bags end up in landfills or the ocean, where they can stay for up to 1,000 years because they are not biodegradable. If plastic bags are banned or cost extra, customers are more likely to bring their own reusable bags or to not use a bag at all. The less people use plastic bags for shopping, the less plastic ends up in landfills and oceans.
- 4 In addition, these laws can limit the toxic chemicals and microplastics released into the air and water. Advocates believe that these laws would protect the health of nearby communities and ecosystems.

## **The Disadvantages of Plastic Bag Reduction Laws**

- 5 Plastic bag industry representatives argue that these laws could result in job loss. They say nearly 30,000 American manufacturing and recycling jobs across the country could be at risk. Instead of decreasing plastic bag production, some advocate for developing better recycling methods.
- 6 Critics also argue that these laws will harm low-income shoppers, who may not be able to afford plastic bag fees or reusable bags. "Many families have a hard time just getting by, paying for groceries, rent and heat," said Simcha Felder, a New York State Senator, about the city's plastic bag tax. "This will hurt lower- and middle-income families who already struggle."

## **How are U.S. Governments Responding to the Debate?**

- 7 Many governments agree that, despite their drawbacks, plastic bag reduction laws help the environment. As a result, governments are working to address the potential negative consequences of these laws. Some governments are funding training programs to help plastic workers transition to renewable energy jobs. Others are providing low-income residents with free, reusable shopping bags.
- 8 As of 2021, nine states have banned single-use plastic bags: California, Oregon, New York, Vermont, Maine, Connecticut, Delaware, Washington, and New Jersey. Hundreds of cities and towns have passed their own plastic bag reduction laws as well.
- 9 Other states and cities are considering a ban or tax on plastic bags. Are the environmental benefits of plastic bag reduction laws worth the economic cost of changing how people shop?