

Tom Berry
Kennebunk

The ban of single-use plastic bags was passed by the Legislature and signed into law by Governor Mills before the pandemic forced delay in implementation. Regarding these efforts to reverse this decision, I have the following comments.

The central feature of each of these legislative documents is the stipulation that the retailer would only be allowed to use single-use plastic bags if there is a receptacle for recycling plastics on the premises and that the retailer “Ensures that the plastic bags collected are recycled or delivered to a person engaged in recycling plastics.”

Therein lies the fundamental flaw in these proposals.

Since China ceased accepting materials for recycling in 2018, the options for dealing with all recyclables in the US have been severely curtailed. While most of us will use the blue or green containers in the belief that what we place there will be re-utilized in some fashion, the sad fact is that most of it will be sent to some under-developed country like Thailand or Vietnam where it actually just ends up in a landfill. From those sites much of the material will eventually find its way into the ocean where the refuse will threaten ocean creatures and disrupt whole ecosystems.

Over 1 million marine animals (663 marine wildlife species, including: mammals, fish, sharks, turtles, and birds) are killed each year due to plastic debris in the ocean, according to UNESCO Facts & Figures on Marine Pollution. For example, researchers have found that 50%-80% of dead sea turtles have ingested plastic, and plastic bags - which resemble jellyfish - are the most commonly found item in sea turtles' stomachs.

For plastic bags that don't end up directly in the ocean, it could take 500 (or more) years for them to degrade in a landfill. And, unfortunately, the bags don't break down completely but instead photo-degrade, becoming microplastics, and these toxic substances leach into the soil and waterways and enter the food chain.

Plastic bag pollution is a staggering global problem. In the US alone, Americans use approximately 100 billion plastic bags a year, or about 360 bags per year for every man, woman and child in the country. (Those 100 billion plastic bags, if tied together, would reach around the Earth's equator 773 times. And, remember, that is happening EVERY YEAR.)

Aside from the severe environmental impacts, we also need to consider the economics. According to the U.S. International Trade Commission, the 100 billion plastic shopping bags in use each year in the U.S. are made from the estimated equivalent of 439 million gallons of oil, and they cost retailers an estimated \$4 billion. And all this for an item that, in our “throw away” culture, is used, on average, for about 12 minutes.

NOTE: LD 108 also includes the suggestion that the ban should be overturned in the interest of public health due, no doubt, to concerns regarding possible transmission of the COVID-19 virus. This rationale must be considered to be weak since the CDC no longer considers surface contamination to be a major vector for spreading the disease.

The arguments that prompted the successful passage of the bill and signature into law have not changed. While plastic bags may be a short-term convenience, it should be clear to any rational person that this convenience is far outweighed by the environmental repercussions and hidden economic costs they entail. For these reasons, I hope these measures are all soundly rejected by the legislature.