

Commentary on LD 108 presented before the Committee on Environment and Natural Resources
February 22, 2021

My name is Greg D'Augustine, and I live in Greene. I opposed to this bill. In these comments I represent the Maine Medical Association and the nonprofit Maine Rivers.

I received my medical degree at Georgetown University and then trained for five years at Maine Medical Center as a resident in general surgery. I have been certified by the American Board of Surgery and am a Fellow of the American College of Surgeons. I practiced general, trauma, and breast cancer surgery in Lewiston for 35 years. I was co-medical director of the Bennett Breast Center at CMMC for more than 10 years.

LD 108 makes the dubious claim that expanding the use of plastic bags will in some way "Improve Public Safety". That is not correct.

As a physician, I read, on average, one scientific article daily regarding SARS Co-V 2 (COVID 19). One year into the pandemic I have yet to read of a single proven case of infection on the basis of surface contamination by the virus.

I have reviewed scientific studies regarding persistence of the virus on various materials, and it is reasonably clear that non porous surfaces, such as plastics, allow for longer survival of the virus. So handing plastic bags to customers at grocery stores appears to provide no health benefit. The fact that the virus remains viable longer on plastic surfaces than on porous fabrics actually raises concern that it may actually increase risk rather than reduce it.

Other health concerns regarding plastics in our environment bear mentioning too. It is well known that plastics persist on our land, in our waters and in the air. From there they pass easily into our drinking water and foods. As a breast cancer surgeon I am familiar with several scientific studies documenting the appearance of plastic components in human breast milk. Plastics have also been identified in 21 types of table salt and are certainly present in many of our foods. Many of these substances are chemically similar to the hormone estrogen. So they can mimic estrogen in plants and animals, including humans. Pending further research we should be concerned about the possibility that we are slowly poisoning ourselves and our children with plastic breakdown products.

Lastly I would like to comment on a problem with the language of LD 108, when it states that "plastic bags collected are recycled or delivered to a person engaged in recycling plastics". Single use plastic bags are not easily recycled, and many plastic recycling locations in Maine, including my local transfer station, specifically disallow plastic bags. The entire recycling process is dynamic and not well tracked. So delivering bags to a "person engaged in recycling plastics" does not equate with actually recycling them.

It's clear that reducing the production of plastics would carry many health benefits. Our current law to limit utilization of single use plastic bags is a reasonable one and it should not be repealed.