



# Bag it Duluth: For the Love of Place

Response to the February 5th, 2016 [Plastic Industry Opinion](#) in the Duluth News Tribune

If there was one clear point that those involved with Bag it Duluth and the Plastic Industry are aligned, it is that the citizens of Duluth agree on the importance of environmental stewardship. However, where Bag it Duluth offers a proposal for how we as a community might move forward together, with new thinking and approaches to get us "unstuck" from the problems of global plastic pollution, the plastics industry offers no new ideas. Their only response is to argue for the same 25-year old strategy of taxpayer-funded education and taxpayer-funded recycling. If these worked, the problem might already be solved, or at a minimum, not growing. But the problem is growing and we need a new path forward.

As we now understand, the Great Lakes are collecting and filling with more than [20 million pounds of plastic every year](#).<sup>1</sup> University of Wisconsin - Superior researcher Dr. Lorena Mendoza has published research on plastic fragments in the Great Lakes and has now discovered their presence in the waters of the St. Louis River and adjacent to Park Point. The Journal [Science documents](#)<sup>2</sup> how fish are now preferentially eating plastic particles over natural food sources, killing them. For the [third year in a row](#),<sup>3</sup> the Earth saw a new record set for the warmest year.

Despite this evidence the plastic industry approach of "business as usual" can be deceptively appealing as it connects with our good intentions, that we can wait just a little bit longer, and don't really have to work together as community on new ways of acting. As we'll highlight, the industry misrepresents key environmental principles, selectively uses data and appeals, and offers us nothing new.

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**Plastics Industry Opinion:** The plastics industry stated that: "the best way to reduce litter and waste is to promote recycling of plastic retail bags and to encourage residents to continue to reuse their bags."

**Bag it Duluth Response:** While on the surface this argument seems very logical, **it is deceptive and contrary** to the environmental principle of a waste hierarchy that informs us that is preferentially better to reduce, reuse and then recycle, not the other way around. The [WLSSD solid waste management plan](#)<sup>4</sup> states, they will "continue to minimize the volume of solid waste requiring disposal in regional landfills by effectively following the State of Minnesota's waste hierarchy." In fact, [the 2016 MPCA report](#)<sup>5</sup> to the Minnesota State legislature includes the following new recommendation to support the waste hierarchy: "Clearly dis-incentivize land disposal. Specifically, change tax/fees, the pay-as-you-throw policy, and other policies to ensure that the least preferable management methods are the most expensive." **The Bag it Duluth proposal embeds reuse into our culture as a priority, consistent with State of Minnesota recommendations and includes a minimum bag charge to prioritize reuse consistent with MPCA recommendation to dis-incentivize land disposal.**

Minnesota's waste hierarchy



**Plastics Industry Opinion:** The plastics industry attempts to suggest that reusable bags are worse because, "Reusable plastic bags qualify as "reusable" and these bags often contain up to six times more plastic than the thinner bags."

**Bag it Duluth Response:** The Bag it Duluth proposal is aimed at encouraging reuse and is focused on helping Duluth as community initiate new thinking about product stewardship. Depending on the type of bag, studies show that reusable bag must be used at least a dozen or so times for there to be an ecological benefit. Bag it Duluth agrees that a reusable plastic bag disposed after once will have a greater ecological impact than a similar single use bag. **This is why the Bag it Duluth proposal incentivizes and promotes reuse.**

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**Plastics Industry Opinion:** The plastics industry uses the argument that, "when Austin Texas banned plastic retail bags and retailers switched to thicker plastic "reusable" bags, it resulted in more plastic waste to the landfill."

**Bag it Duluth Response:** The plastic industry is deceptive because it suggests that the Bag it Duluth proposal is the same as the Austin ordinance when they are not. Moreover, the plastics industry selectively ignores key conclusions from the [Austin government report](#)<sup>6</sup> which endorse and support the **Bag it Duluth proposal**. The Austin report highlights how once single use plastic bags were phased-out, select retailers began to distribute heavier 4 millimeter "reusable" plastic bags. Because the Austin ordinance did not include a minimum bag charge to promote reuse, consumers used the reusable bag as a single use bag and more plastic ended up in the landfill. Austinites didn't change behavior significantly; they simply threw away the heavier plastic bags further illustrating how stuck in our ways we have become.

The plastic industry opinion ignored Austin Resource Recovery Director Bob Gedert who said that reusable bags should be able to withstand 100 uses, and that if consumers use them between six and eight times before discarding them, they will have offset the bags' carbon footprint. **"I think the lesson learned from this study is that we need to promote reuse," he said.**

The plastics industry also ignored the following statement by the Austin study author Aaron Waters: "Indeed, the amount of single-use plastic bags has been reduced, both in count and by weight. The current evidence suggests that **the single use bag ordinance has achieved a greater reduction than the voluntary reduction's loftiest goals.**"

What was learned in Austin is similar to a key realization from an [Australian government](#)<sup>7</sup> report: "... **the introduction of bag charges at a retail level does lead to a major shift** from single-use bags to reusable bags or no bag transactions."

If we want to change behavior we must promote and incentivize reuse. **This is why the Bag it Duluth proposal, like many other cities, now includes a minimum charge on all carry-out bags, whether single use paper or plastic.**

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**Plastics Industry Opinion:** The plastics industry states that "Folks in Duluth who reuse their plastic retail bags as trash-bin liners would be forced to buy bigger, thicker plastic bags."

**Bag it Duluth Opinion:** Clearly, some citizens may use their single use plastic bags as bin liners, but it seems unlikely that the average family finds uses for the [1,500 bags](#)<sup>8</sup> brought home each year. This one time use of the bags should be praised, but the reality is most single use bags end up in the landfill. Other research shows the purchase of bin liners will not increase significantly, compared with the reduction of plastic shopping bags. Between 2005 and 2006, the number of shopping bags used in [Australia](#)<sup>9</sup> dropped by 560 million, but sales of bin liners increased by 38 million. The Bag it Duluth proposal does not prohibit retailers from bulk sales of single use thin film bags in the grocery aisle. **The Bag it Duluth proposal is focused on promoting reuse at the store counter where the majority of bags are exchanged.**

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**Plastics Industry Opinion:** The plastics industry also states: "Traditional reusable grocery bags are not reused as much as people think. A recent study found that folks use them less than 15 times. The study found that consumers said they forgot their reusable bags upwards of 40 percent of the time."

**Bag it Duluth Response:** Again, study after study<sup>10</sup> demonstrates that a minimum bag charge is required to incentivize reuse. Without a minimum bag charge, consumers do not change their behavior despite best intentions. There are several explanations.

Consider how some Duluth area stores include a small 5-cent incentive if consumers bring in a reusable bag. Though well intentioned, because of behavioral economics these have limited impact on behavior change. What this field of study shows is that consumers will go out of their way to avoid a small financial charge, but are far less motivated by a reward of the same amount. This is especially true if the consumer is already motivated to reuse bags; without a minimum charge even motivated consumers will tend to forget and leave their reusable bags at home. In cities and states where a minimum bag charge is in place, reusable bag rates reach levels of 80%. **This is why the Bag it Duluth proposal, like many other cities, now includes a minimum charge on all carry-out bags, for single use paper and reusable plastic.**

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**Plastics Industry Opinion:** The plastics industry states that, "Polyethylene film recycling has increased 74% since 2005" and that "One bag recycler has up to 60% recycled content in some of their materials." Also "More than 90% of people have access to plastic-bag recycling and retail take back programs."

**Bag it Duluth Response:** We must be careful as numbers can be used deceptively. Since 2005, the EPA began to lump the recycling rate of plastic bags into "Bags, sacks and wraps" – HDPE, LDPE and LLDPE plastics. This new way of calculating recycling rates made the tracking of recycling rates for carry-out plastic bags more difficult. Most single use carry-out bags are HDPE. Bags and wrap made from LDPE and LLDPE plastic are a more valuable recycling stream with a fairly well established recycling infrastructure. The 74% rate cited by the plastics industry suggests incredible recycling rates of HDPE plastics bags but the true recycling rate is very unclear because of the way recycling rates are tracked. It is likely, that the increased recycling rates cited by the plastics industry are from LDPE, not single use carry-out bags. We do know in Duluth, recycling haulers consider single use plastic bags a contaminant in the waste stream and that according to the Minnesota Pollution

Control Agency, less than 10% of single use plastic bags are recycled. Instead of collecting the estimated 1,500 single use plastic bags per family per year and trying to remember to bring them to the difficult-to-find specialized recycling boxes, why not have 3-4 reusable bags and bring them to the store.

The industry also cites that 90% of people have access to plastic bag recycling. While this statistic may be true, access is not the same as recycling rates. It is estimated that in Minnesota, no more than 10% of plastic bags are recycled and estimates in other states are much lower. The plastic industry statement that 90% of Americans have access to recycling does not mean that 90% of consumers recycle. In fact it helps us understand that despite 25 years of education and with 90% of consumers having access to recycling, single use plastics bag recycling rates remain dismally low suggesting this approach doesn't work.

**The Bag it Duluth proposal is focused on promoting reuse because it is recognized as preferentially better than recycling by the WLSSD and the State of Minnesota.** Moreover, after nearly three decades it seems that plastic recycling is at a standstill and we need to act and think differently.

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**Plastics Industry Opinion:** The plastics industry close their opinion with the statement that "The plastics-bag manufacturers and the citizens of Duluth all agree on the importance of environmental stewardship, which is why a focus on recycling education is the best option."

**Bag it Duluth Response:** It is unclear how these two points are linked. We agree with the plastics industry that the citizens of Duluth agree on the importance of environmental stewardship but the plastics industry has not offered a defensible argument on why a focus on recycling education will work. Moreover, the plastics industry ignores the fact that we citizens fund the majority of recycling education through our taxes.<sup>11</sup> The WLSSD spends more than \$600,000 per year on waste education and waste reduction.<sup>12</sup>

The Bag it Campaign has highlighted how our proposal can save one grocery store the equivalent of about \$60,000 dollars per year (about the cost to supply every citizen in Duluth with one reusable bag), reduce the give-away of 1.5 million single use bags per store, minimize climate change and be consistent with the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency recommendations to the state legislature on product stewardship.

The Bag it Duluth proposal has at its core the need for reuse, and for all of Duluth to take a small steps to change our approach over the waste we collectively generate. In Duluth, our values help us understand that we must all take a small step and act differently. Litter, climate change, water impacts and fish mortality are some of the signals telling us that the same old strategies of aren't working and that it is time for a new approach.

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1<http://www.natureworldnews.com/articles/34435/20161220/nearly-22-million-pounds-plastic-pollution-enter-great-lakes-year.htm>

2<http://science.sciencemag.org/content/352/6290/1213>

3<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-climatechange-temperatures-idUSKBN15227X>

4<http://wlssd.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/WLSSD-SWMP-2013-.pdf>

5<https://www.pca.state.mn.us/sites/default/files/lrw-sw-1sy15.pdf>

6<http://www.austintexas.gov/edims/document.cfm?id=232679>

7<http://www.nepc.gov.au/system/files/resources/0c513e54-d968-ac04-758b-3b7613af0d07/files/ps-pbags-hyder-consulting-bag-use-2006-07-consumption-200805.pdf>

8<https://www.nrdc.org/media/2008/080109>

9<http://www.nepc.gov.au/system/files/resources/0c513e54-d968-ac04-758b-3b7613af0d07/files/ps-pbags-hyder-consulting-bag-use-2006-07-consumption-200805.pdf>

<sup>10</sup><http://ddoe.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/ddoe/publication/attachments/DDOE%202013%20Bag%20Law%20Survey%20Final%20Report%20%282%29.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> <https://nextcity.org/features/view/cost-of-recycling-america-extended-producer-responsibility-cities>

<sup>12</sup> <http://wlssd.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/WLSSD-SWMP-2013-.pdf>