

Plastic shopping bags make a come back

Ken Henrick CEO, NARGA

Plastic shopping bags - or, more correctly, lightweight high density polyethylene bags issued mainly throughout the grocery industry - are back in the news for a number of reasons.

Back in 2003 the Australian Retailers Association promoted a code of practice which began a process of reduction of bag use which committed the major chains, in particular, to reduction targets of 25 per cent by the end of 2004 and 50 per cent by the end of 2005.

The logical extension of that idea was that such bags would be phased out in only a few years.

The reduction targets were agreed by the supermarket chains, despite the risk that failure to reach such targets could be used by regulators as a weapon against them and despite the fact that Commonwealth-funded research had found that supermarkets were not the source of the "problem". Most lightweight HDPE shopping bags in the litter stream came from takeaways or away from home uses and from poorly managed government landfills.

Indeed, the problem has always been essentially a litter problem and you don't reduce littering behaviour by targeting only one type of item in the litter stream.

That didn't stop the usual suspects from claiming that lightweight plastic shopping bags killed untold numbers of marine and terrestrial wildlife, that the relatively tiny percentage of bags which got into the litter stream were so dangerous that all bags should be banned.

More recently, however, the propaganda has bumped up against reality.

Lightweight HDPE shopping bags are strong, waterproof and exceptionally suitable for the purpose for which they have been designed - carrying large weights and volumes of hot, cold, fresh and packaged products from point of sale to home.

The Productivity Commission has now stepped in to underline arguments which some industry representatives have understood for some time.

First, the wild claims about death and injury to wildlife are based on only one "survey" of very dubious validity set up by an overseas environmental group in 1989. Its rather shaky conclusions have since been extrapolated to the entire globe and taken as statistical gospel, but without validation.

Environmental groups drag out photographs of dead turtles and seals, for example, with what appears to be (and probably is) plastic protruding from their mouths. Oddly, the plastic



Ken Henrick CEO, NARGA with Jennifer Flanagan at the last NARGA Meeting in Sydney

doesn't bear much resemblance to lightweight HDPE shopping bags - more like heavyweight plastic groundsheets or pallet wrap. The environment manager of one regional municipality told me most of the plastic bags that get into the sea are, logically enough, bait bags, not shopping bags.

Some say the dead marine creatures mistook the plastic for jelly fish, although it's not clear who asked the animals what they thought they saw and ate. Nor what they said in reply.

Secondly, no cost-benefit analysis of phase-out has ever been conducted.

In fact, such an analysis is required by the regulatory assessment procedures agreed by the Council of Australian Governments (the Federal, State and Territory governments).

Industry organisations which were inclined to go along with the movement towards a phase-out are now far less enthusiastic because, frankly, there is no genuinely effective alternative to lightweight HDPE bags: paper bags break and you can really carry no more than two; cotton bags have massive environmental impacts in the growing and processing of cotton, and polypropylene "green bags" are far heavier than HDPE and are far more expensive to distribute and store - and people can't easily put half a dozen in their back pockets every time they leave the house.

And biodegradables haven't as yet lived up to the promise.

So the tide may be changing. With the Productivity Commission's report now on the table, people are taking another look at the arguments for phase-out and finding them wanting. Most industry associations have told the Federal Government they no longer support any such phase-out.

A more sensible approach for industry would involve supporting any anti-litter programs which covers littering behaviour across the board, while encouraging every retailer to issue only as many bags as are needed to look after the customers' purchases.