

The Plastic Bag Debate

There is a growing world wide trend towards the phasing out of plastic bags in supermarkets and other retail outlets.

Environmentalists, businesses, politicians and the community generally are all taking a serious look at the use of plastic bags and the potential problems that they may be causing to our environment.

There are numerous statistics available on how our environment is seriously affected by the continued use of plastic bags. It is estimated that Australians use approximately 5 billion plastic bags annually, that our marine environment is being seriously affected by plastic bag litter and that our land-fills are full of plastic bags that are dumped there on a regular basis. On the other side of the argument, there are some who will strongly dispute that plastic bags create the environmental hazard that is currently portrayed.

The cries to get rid of plastic bags have been getting louder over the years. In 2002 a levy was placed on plastic bags in Ireland and the monies were donated to charity. The result was a 95% reduction in the use of plastic bags in 18 months. Other countries around the world have followed the lead set in Ireland and questions are now being asked here in Australia as to what we should all be doing about the problem.

Retailers are asking should we :

- have a levy on plastic bags at the point of sale?
- give cotton bags away, or sell them?
- continue to use plastic bags until there is some legislation that forces us not to provide them?

These are not easy questions to answer.

South Australia has decided to take the legislative path to remedy what that State perceives as a serious problem. As



from 1 January 2009 it will be illegal to provide plastic bags in supermarkets or any other retail outlet in South Australia.

State and Federal Environmental Ministers at a recent meeting failed to reach a national agreement on laws to ban the use of plastic bags. The Victorian Environmental Minister said that a State levy would be imposed on plastic bags in locations yet to be confirmed, the NSW Environment Minister stated that there needed to be more research done on biodegradable bags and the Federal Minister, Mr. Peter Garrett, said that the Federal Government needed to explore further options to reduce the use of plastic bags. The Queensland Environmental Minister said that he would not support a levy which would impose a financial burden on families but, that he would support an eventual ban.

On Friday 15 May 2008, Senator Bob Brown introduced a Private Members Bill into the Senate calling for a levy to be placed on plastic bags at point of sale outlets. There will no doubt be some heated discussion before the Bill proceeds further.

See what retailers should do on pages 22 and 23

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