



MEMORANDUM

Reusable Bags and Protecting Public Health

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The COVID-19 crisis is being inappropriately used by business and industry to push for suspending state and local bag bans, bag fees and other policies that promote reusable bags. Recently, the Plastics Industry Association authored a letter urging the U.S. Dept. of Health & Human Services to issue statements acknowledging the health benefits of single-use plastics, and asking the agency to “speak out against bans on these products as a public safety risk.” Simultaneously, state and local lawmakers have come under increased pressure from business and industry groups to roll back state and local bag bans and fees on disposable bags.

Lawmakers are encouraged to proceed with caution when legislating around disposable and reusable bags during these uncertain times. Currently, there is no credible peer-reviewed scientific evidence to support the claim that reusable bags contribute to the transmission of COVID-19.

The actual half life of Corona virus on fabrics is uncertain. **However, studies indicate that viruses and bacteria last longer on non-porous surfaces such as plastic than they do on natural fibers.** A recent New England Journal of Medicine report suggests that viruses only live for a few hours to a day on cardboard, while they can last up to 72 hours on plastic and stainless steel¹.

Further, available research indicates that grocery stores and other retail establishments can be highly unsanitary, as many of the foods and food packaging tested were found to be contaminated with high levels of bacteria². This reinforces the need for consumers to properly wash everything they come in contact with, in addition to items that others have touched before they enter the home environment. This includes using soap and hot water, good hand washing techniques, washing reusable shopping bags and disinfecting packaged products, doorknobs and public touch screens.

Disposable paper and plastic bags cannot be washed with soap and water, nor can retailers guarantee these items are sterile before they come in contact with shoppers. Common-sense management practices are needed to ensure that consumers are not unnecessarily exposed to viruses and bacteria. Retail employees may ask consumers to pack their own groceries in reusable bags out of an abundance of caution. Shoppers may, in turn, ask cashiers to place purchased items back in the cart, so that they may bag their own items outside the store.

Industry efforts to suspend and undo state and local bag laws have no basis in science, and are merely scare tactics to advance their agenda during a severe public health crisis³. During these uncertain times the public, businesses and policymakers alike should employ good sanitary practices across the board, not implement policy decisions based on fear or an absence of data.

¹ https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMc2004973?query=featured_home

² <https://www.consumerreports.org/cro/news/2010/07/can-reusable-grocery-bags-make-you-sick-or-is-that-just-baloney/index.htm>

³ <https://dailygazette.com/article/2020/03/27/editorial-covid-19-no-excuse-to-get-rid-of-plastic-bag-ban>