



---

To: Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Energy  
From: Taylor Johnson, VPIRG  
Subject: Testimony regarding S. 205  
Date: February 27, 2014

---

Chairman Hartwell and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding S.205. For the record, my name is Taylor Johnson and I'm an Environmental Health Associate at the Vermont Public Interest Research Group (VPIRG). VPIRG is the largest consumer and environmental advocacy group in the state with more than 30,000 members and supporters.

I am here today to offer VPIRG's full support of this bill as well as the rationale for proposing it.

A five-cent fee on disposable checkout bags has been proven to dramatically reduce plastic bag use and promote a sweeping change in behavior to reusable bags and we feel that a ten-cent fee will improve these results.

Vermonters are tired of seeing plastic bags caught in tree branches, dotting roadsides, and blowing down neighborhood streets. Litter brings down residents' quality of life and this legislation looks to alleviate this problem by incentivizing the use of reusable bags.

It is also worth mentioning that the only market that processes post-consumer plastic bags is the composite lumber industry. Those factories are in Virginia and the Southwest, so even if Vermonters recycled all of their plastic bags, they would be trucked at least a thousand miles to get there.

The greater problem, of course, is with the plastic bags. But single use paper bags have their drawbacks too. Paper bags contribute to global warming – maybe even more than plastic bags – and they take up more room in landfills when not recycled.

Plastic bags are having devastating effects on our environment. Consider the problem of plastic waste in the Pacific Ocean. There is an estimated 100 million tons of plastic pollution in the Pacific. This trash is concentrated by the ocean currents into an area twice the size of Texas where plastic is 43 times more prevalent than plankton, the fundamental food source of the ocean.

Because plastic never actually biodegrades but can only photo-degrade into smaller and smaller bits, the plastic is likely to stay in the ocean for hundreds, if not thousands of years. Plastic starves, strangles, suffocates, and poisons millions of sea turtles, birds, whales, and fish every year.

Annually, Americans use and dispose of 100 billion plastic shopping bags, according to the Wall Street Journal, and an estimated 12 million of barrels of oil are needed to manufacture that many bags. The New York City Sanitation Department has found that plastic bags and other plastic film represent 4 to 5 percent of the city's residential waste load. No more than 5 percent of plastic grocery bags were recycled across the country in 2005, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

We strongly urge this committee to take a hard look at the results a 5 cent bag fee has produced in Washington D.C., specifically business support for the fee (78% of businesses surveyed say the fee has had a positive or neutral impact on their business) and the fact that 80% of D.C. residents have reported using fewer bags.

I thank you for the opportunity to testify today and would be happy to answer any questions.