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Retailers reducing plastic bag use

Compiled by Larry Kershner



Hy-Vee employe Erin Foster prepares to bag a customer's groceries with a Hippo Sak, a stronger, larger, plastic bag designed to reduce the volume of plastic bags being disbursed among retailers.

Nationwide, legislators and consumers are looking for ways to reduce the usage of plastic shopping bags. But some chains are already making progress in reducing the number of bags leaving their stores, on their own.

Des Moines-based Hy-Vee, an established employee owned U.S. grocery retail food company, is proactively reducing plastic bag use and has switched a growing number of the Hy-Vee stores to a new reinforced grocery bag system.

The environmentally friendly solution they chose is the Hippo Sak front-end bagging system from Los Angeles-based company Crown Poly. Hippo Sak is a patented, reinforced, bottom seal T-shirt bag which can carry over 26 one-pound cans without breaking or tearing holes at the bottom and it never needs double bagging.

Jim Hoover, a manager at the Hy-Vee store in Mt. Pleasant, said that the store has seen fewer bags disbursed because they do hold more than the former bags and that they are stronger.

"It used to be that the corner of a box of cereal could tear a hole in the [former] bags," Hoover said, adding that the Hippo Saks are tougher.

In controlled tests, Hippo Sak achieved an annualized reduction in bag use of over 25 percent.

This results in millions of fewer bags going into landfills every year. Hippo Sak achieves this reduction because of its reinforced, bottom seal, which allows for an increased item count of 10-12 items per bag compared to the current national average of 3.4 items per bag.

This means that one Hippo Sak can replace upward to three current plastic bags leaving the store.

The Hippo Sak bags consumers take home can be re-used in the household as a five-gallon kitchen trash bag. Hippo Sak is the first grocery bag to embrace the 3 R's - reduce, reuse, and recycle.

Consumers also benefit from having fewer bags to carry. The wider reinforced handles are stronger and more comfortable to carry. Hippo Sak bags also have a unique Hippo Tie feature designed to prevent spillage in the car.

Hy-Vee is achieving 25 percent grocery bag usage and waste in a way that does not negatively impact shoppers.

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Ban on bags proposed in Hartford

By: Nancy Barnes

A state proposal to ban the use of white plastic shopping bags received a skeptical review from state representatives including Clark Chapin (R-New Milford), the ranking member on the Joint Committee for the Environment.

That panel held a public hearing Monday on an act that would ban the use of the bags. "I don't think it has too great a chance of passing, but very few things surprise me in this building," Mr. Chapin said. The motion concerned "An Act Banning Retail Use of Plastic Bags," that would ban the retail use of non-biodegradable plastic bags after Jan. 1, 2010.

The issue of the plastic bag, however, is a complex one, with no easy replacement for the thin, translucent or transparent bags in sight.

"It's a little bit more complex issue than it may appear on the surface," said Catherine Browne, speaking from the Los Angeles-based company Crown Poly, which is a plastic manufacturing company that counts the Big Y Inc. supermarket chain among its global clients.

"A ban is not the answer. Plastic bags are not the problem. Paper bags are worse for the environment. They use far more water and energy to produce," she said, noting that the effect of producing a paper bag on carbon emissions is seven times greater than that for a plastic bag.

Mr. Chapin said the Connecticut legislation currently under review is not the first to be presented in the state.

"In 2005, there were two bills regarding plastic bags. Rep. Carson and I introduced one at the request of a New Milford resident 'to require retail establishments using plastic shopping bags to provide receptacles on the premises for the return and recycling of such shopping bags.' The purpose of the second one was to require the recycling of plastic shopping bags," he said.

"In 2007, there were two other bills introduced. The first one again, required that they be recycled. The purpose of the second one was 'to require the recycling of plastic shopping bags and prohibit the use of such bags not later than three years of the adoption of this act,' he continued. "This was the only one to receive a hearing, but it didn't go any further."

"I don't plan on supporting an outright ban on them," he said of what has become the omnipresent and highly controversial plastic bag.

Ms. Browne noted that so-called biodegradable bags require oxygen and light to degrade and, so, do not disappear when covered by mounds of garbage at landfills.

"You'll be able to dig it up in 20 years," she said.

She said that plastic bags—at least those manufactured in this country—are not made with crude oil as a base.

"Any plastic bag made in the United States is not made from crude oil. [They are] made from natural gas," she said, adding that if the plastic bags come from China, their manufacture does involve a petrol product. Roughly 20 percent of all plastic bags used in this country are imported from outside the country," she said. San Francisco, which became the first major urban area in the nation to ban the bags, albeit only from supermarkets, did so in 2006.

"They banned typical plastic bags. They're OK with compostable bags," she said. A compostable bag, she said, will break down in a municipal compost facility, which San Francisco now has.

"Most states, most cities, most counties do not have one," she said, noting that the large equipment San Francisco now owns uses high heat and pressure to dispose of compostable bags.

Ms. Browne, who recently traveled to Europe, noted that the France had tried to tackle the problem of the plastic bag, only to find that the pieces of so-called biodegradable bags wound up in the water. There, they were consumed by fish that were subsequently consumed by people, she said. Indeed, the issue of the paper bag has become a global one, with Ireland having already attempted to limit its use by charging fees to customers for each bag given out at stores. In going without the plastic bag, according to Ms. Brown, many in Ireland, who had reused the plastic bag for trash, simply purchased the far larger garbage or trash bags instead.

"It keeps popping up," said Claire D'Amour-Daley, speaking from the Big Y Inc. headquarters in Springfield, Mass., of the question of the biodegradable bag. She noted that a plastic bag is termed a penny bag whereas a paper bag is termed a nickel bag. "You're cutting your costs," she said of the non-biodegradable bag, giving that as the reason for its proliferation broadly. Although the Big Y uses a non-biodegradable bag, she said, it has chosen a bag known as the "hippo," whose thicker bottom can carry up to 50 pounds, and it has trained persons at its check-out counter in ways she termed extensive on how to put the Big Y product in it.

"We would love it to be biodegradable," she said of the plastic bag.

"We use fewer bags overall," she said of a kind of bag whose numbers, according to Walmartfacts.com, amount to one hundred billion bags that are used each year in the United States alone.

Wal-Mart, according to E. R. Anderson, a regional media director based in Washington, D.C., is also using fewer bags and recycling the plastic bags that customers in its stores do use.

"Wal-Mart has done some research on using biodegradable bags instead of a plastic bag," Ms. Anderson said. "So far, research has shown that the bags don't break down as well as we would have liked. The breakdown wasn't as intended and harmful gases were produced in the wearing-away process." She noted that, when customers return their plastic bags to the collection bins outside Wal-Mart stores, a commercial piece of equipment called the sandwich bale that the company has developed comes into play. "The bale presses all these bags together into two stacks of cardboard, and then they're bundled for transport," she said.

Crown Poly's Ms. Brown noted that a number of end products for the recycled plastic bag have sprung up, with lumber made in part from reused plastic bags now available at such stores as Home Depot. Railroad ties and flower pots are other uses for the recycled bag, she said, noting that a lot of companies have spent a lot of money concerning the fate of the plastic bag.

"It's being reused," she said of the plastic bag which is developing an end market, noting that the two other "R's" the federal Environmental Protection Agency promotes are recycling and reducing the use of bags. "The true environmentalists want reusable bags to be used," she said.

SPOKANE

Rosauer's switches to eco-friendlier bags

Parker Howell Staff writer

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The longstanding contest between paper and plastic bags in the checkout line has a new twist for customers at Rosauers Supermarkets outlets.

This fall, the Spokane-based chain switched to Eco Hippo sacks, a brand whose maker boasts never needs double-bagging and can carry more than 26 pounds of food without breaking.

While the translucent, green totes resemble typical disposable, high-density polyethylene bags, they feature a patented, reinforced bottom and are made with post-industrial recycled resin, according to manufacturer Crown Poly Inc., of Los Angeles. That means a reusable bag advocates say is more eco-friendly than standard sacks, which often are recyclable but frequently end up in landfills.

"It's a green-friendly bag, and it's a nice strong bag, and that's usually what the consumer is worried about," said Mike Shirts, Rosauers' vice president of operations.

Plastic bags recently came under scrutiny as San Francisco became the first major U.S. city to forbid use of non-biodegradable plastic bags by large supermarkets and drug stores.

Using the sacks at Rosauers stores, which used about 12 million plastic bags last year, costs a little more. But a reduction in bag usage should make up the difference, Shirts said.

"It's unbelievable how strong it is," he said. "Now there's really no reason to double-bag."

Crown Poly boasts the bag can reduce usage by more than 25 percent annually.

Yoke's Foods Inc. took a different route, converting its 12 stores nearly three years ago to biodegradable polyethylene bags, said senior vice president Denny York.

Yoke's bags use an additive that developer EPI Environmental Technologies Inc., of Vancouver, B.C., claims makes them break down into harmless components if accidentally discarded outdoors.

"They say they start that biodegradable process within two-to-four months, and it can take up to two-to-four years just depending on the environment," York said.

Only about 7.8 percent of the 4.6 million tons of plastic sacks, bags and wraps in the municipal waste stream last year were recycled, compared to about 25 percent of paper bags, according to the federal Environmental Protection Agency.

Plastic bags, however, have become the dominant variety since being introduced decades ago. Ninety percent of grocery bags are plastic, according to the Progressive Bag Alliance, a group of plastic bag manufacturers.

About 100 billion bags are sold annually around the world, according to the alliance.

Rosauers used the competing “rhino” bag as an interim solution, but it wasn’t as strong as Eco Hippos, Shirts said.

Huckleberry’s Natural Market, a Rosauers-owned store, still offers traditional bags, but the company is considering alternatives, Shirts said.

Rosauers, a wholly owned subsidiary of Spokane-headquartered URM Stores Inc., owns 22 stores in four states, including several Super 1 Foods.

Some environmentalists pitch reusable cloth sacks, such as those Rosauers and Yoke’s sell for about \$1, as the ideal shopping-bag alternative. Yoke’s once discontinued them, but now it has “a heck of a time” keeping them in stock, York said.

“Now that everybody’s going green, we put them back in, and we just can’t order enough of them,” York said. “They are just an incredible selling item.”

Albertsons is pushing customers toward cloth bags, said spokeswoman Stephanie Martin. The company also sometimes purchases benches made from recycled bags for new stores, she said.

Crown Poly makes Eco Hippo sacks through an internal recycling program, reusing scraps of its other bag lines, said spokeswoman Elizabeth Wang. **The resin for those bags comes from natural gas, she said.**

It launched the patented Hippo Sak late last year, and Eco Hippo bags are used by markets in Seattle, Oregon and California, according to the company.

Many plastic bags, including Eco Hippos, are recyclable, denoted by a triangular symbol with a number in the center printed on bags. In Washington, Fred Meyer, Safeway, Wal-Mart, Albertsons and Yoke’s are among chains offering drop-off locations, according to www.plasticbagrecycling.org and York.

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The Republican.

Plastic-bag era ending at local grocery stores

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By STAN FREEMAN

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That inevitable question at the checkout counter - "Paper or plastic?" - is evolving. Soon, it may be, "Paper, or did you bring you own?"

Whole Foods Markets will stop offering plastic grocery bags by Earth Day on April 22, giving customers a choice between recycled paper or reusable bags.

Big Y Foods has begun using a stronger, reinforced plastic bag that it hopes will reduce its plastic bag use by as much as 20 percent.

And, Stop & Shop, which like other establishments offers recycling containers for consumers to return their lastic bags, is encouraging customers to try its reusable - and green - grocery sacks.

It is part of a growing consensus that the ubiquitous plastic bags, which all too often end up as road-side litter, can no longer be used with a clear conscience.

Val A. Hoiston, of West Springfield, is among the consumers who are going "green" when it comes to bagging their groceries.

"It avoids the mess of having lots of plastic bags all over the place, and it's a way to help with the pollution problem caused by the plastic bags," she said.

"Plastic is made from petroleum, and, over the last couple of years, there's been an increasing awareness that our use of petroleum is wasteful and excessive, and while we can't snap our fingers and make all plastic bags disappear tomorrow, what Whole Foods is doing is a first good step to using less of them," said Janet S. Domenitz, executive director of the Massachusetts Public Interest Research Group, an environmental lobbying group.

Indeed, San Francisco became the first U.S. city to ban plastic shopping bags. Boston and New York are considering bans, and New Jersey is looking to impose a ban on single-use plastic bags for large grocery chains and big-box stores in the next two years.

China, where an estimated 3 billion are used every day, wants to outlaw their manufacture, starting in June.

And, in Ireland, when they were taxed at checkout counters, use of the bags reportedly fell by 94 percent - within weeks.

Whole Foods, which maintains almost 270 stores in this country, Canada, and Great Britain, including a store in Hadley, estimates its action will keep 100 million new plastic grocery bags out of the waste stream by year's end.

"More and more cities and countries are beginning to place serious restrictions on single-use plastic shopping bags, since they don't break down in our landfills, can harm nature by clogging waterways and endangering wildlife, and litter our roadsides," said A.C. Gallo, Whole Foods' chief operating officer.

At Big Y, which has 55 stores in Massachusetts and Connecticut, the goal is to reduce the use of plastic bags by 20 percent with a stronger reinforced plastic bag, called the Hippo Sak. This allows more items to be carried in one bag, said Janet Rankin, manager of customer services.

Instead of the national average of 3.4 items for the typical plastic bag, the Hippo Sak can hold 10 to 12 items and up to 26 pounds without breaking, according to the bag's maker, Crown Poly.

"So there's a great reduction of the plastic that's going into the landfill," said Rankin. "But it's our goal to get customers to return them so they don't go into the landfill. The bags that are returned are recycled. The plastic is turned into decking."

Hippo Sak is also being used by smaller grocers such as the Atkins Farm Market in Amherst. Big Y stores are also selling reusable bags and freezer bags.

Stop & Shop, which has almost 390 stores in six northeastern states, including Massachusetts, continues to encourage use of its own and other reusable bags. But it also continues to offer paper bags and conventional plastic bags.

"However, we do accept the plastic bags back for recycling at bins in our stores; they are eventually recycled into manmade lumber," said spokesman Robert E. Keane.

While many shoppers have adopted the use of reusable bags, the clear preference of environmentalists, most shoppers have not.

Bernard J. Bushey, the manager of Armata's Super Market in Longmeadow, said, "Quite a few, maybe 20 percent of customers, are requesting paper bags, and some, maybe 5 percent, are bringing in their own bags. But maybe 75 percent of customers will request plastic bags."

Shopper Hoistion said she has found the reusable bags can hold as much if not more than regular plastic bags. "I can put like three full cartons of yogurt in these," she said pointing to a bright-green reusable bag hanging from her shopping cart. "I just love them."

Staff writer Elizabeth Román contributed to this report.