

Faran Savitz
Zero Waste Advocate - PennEnvironment

Let me start out by saying that I strongly disagree with the findings and the conclusions of the [recent Freedonia study on the effectiveness of New Jersey's plastic bag law](#). From an environmental and public health perspective, plastic bags are the worst option for the environment and plastic bag bans are effective tools at reducing waste and pollution. The Freedonia study was commissioned and paid for by the plastics industry, which doesn't automatically invalidate it, but it is important to understand where this research is coming from. While being industry-funded does not make it suspect, what is suspect is their methodology. Freedonia looked mainly at the supply-side of bags like vendors and distributors, rather than the actual demand or use of the bags, and instead of relying on data, they used only "interviews" and conversations with industry insiders. Their research didn't study consumer behavior, didn't look at litter, and didn't consider the end of life impacts of the various bag options. It doesn't provide the most accurate accounting of New Jersey's plastic bag ban.

Our national partners, the US PIRG Education Fund, the Environment America Research & Policy Center, and Frontier Group recently [put out a study](#) that looked at case studies of plastic bag bans at the local and state level from around the country (including NJ and Philadelphia) and found that plastic bag bans are actually really effective. Five such laws, including the states of New Jersey and Vermont, and the cities of Philadelphia, Portland (OR) and Santa Barbara (CA) eliminate over 6 billion single-use plastic bags per year combined. Especially when done well, laws like these are good for the environment.

Even accepting the methodology and findings of the Freedonia study, it's fairly easy to disagree with their conclusions. Their issues are with poor quality "reusable" bags that can't be reused enough to make them environmentally worth it and their assertion that people don't actually reuse higher quality reusable bags that many times. Their thinking being that since these bags are heavier duty and often made from synthetic fabrics or other materials, if they're not being reused then they have a greater material and environmental cost than single-use plastic bags. Their conclusion is to say because of these issues let's just stick to the conventional plastic bags. And while we agree that there are a ton of bad plastic bag alternatives out there, like thicker plastic film bags, our conclusion and the conclusion of our report is very different. Our report, like Freedonia's, found that there have been loopholes in plastic bag bans around the country except we outline ways to close them. A benefit of Pennsylvania being behind our neighbors on this front is that we can see where they have gone wrong and how to do better. So rather than say "people aren't reusing bags enough so let's go back to the plastic bags that are so damaging to our environment and climate" we recommend designing plastic bag bans to prevent bad alternatives through strong definitions and to include paper and reusable bag fees so that people are encouraged to bring their own bags from home. [PennEnvironment has model legislation](#) that actually addresses these issues. The definitions we recommend prevent many of the bad reusable bags the plastics industry study talks about and believes are such an issue. We define plastic bags to include any bags made from a plastic film, regardless of how thick they are. We also define reusable bags to require certain materials and require stitched-on

handles to ensure quality. We also include bag fees for any alternatives provided by retailers to encourage reuse. New Jersey's law, which is what the Freedonia study looked at, doesn't include fees and so doesn't have an incentive for people to bring their own bag from home. Studies show that a small fee drastically increases the proportion of people bringing their own bags. So rather than say these laws don't work, we believe that designing a plastic bag ban well can completely avoid these issues. A well-designed ban can eliminate the worst environmental option, the plastic bag, can prevent the use of poor substitutes with intentional definitions, and can encourage people to do the best thing for our environment and reuse their own bags over and over again.

So even if we completely accept the findings of the Freedonia study, and ignore the issues with methodology and provenance, we can still avoid the issues they outline by crafting a strong plastics ordinance. Laws like these are incredibly effective at reducing plastic pollution and litter. A ban in Abington could eliminate [over 16 million plastic bags each year](#), to put that into perspective, laid end to end they'd stretch over 3000 miles, enough to snake from Abington all the way to the Pacific Ocean. Those bags banned would also eliminate the over 87,000 gallons of oil needed to produce that plastic. These laws have a concrete impact and remove plastic bags that can't be easily recycled, are made from fossil fuels, litter our communities, and break into microplastics that pollute our air, water, and are increasingly being linked to health impacts in humans and wildlife.

Whale question

I've been informed there was a question about a photo of a whale included in my presentation from last year. I apologize if there was confusion or if anyone feels misled by that photo, it's of an art installation that represents the plastic ingested by whales. That was deliberate, we chose not to include an actual photo of a dead whale since that could be disturbing or troubling to some people. There is plenty of documentation of whales washing ashore completely filled with plastic and several links are below. Research has also found that plastic bags and other plastic film are one of the most prevalent types of plastic found in these cases (citation below). Happy to clarify any statistics or images in the presentation. I'd also be happy to provide photos of actual whales that died due to plastic ingestion if anyone is curious, but again, the presentation uses the art installation as a visual since such photos can get quite graphic.

<https://www.vox.com/2019/5/24/18635543/plastic-pollution-bags-whale-stomach-beached>

<https://www.npr.org/2019/03/18/704471596/stomach-of-dead-whale-contained-nothing-but-plastic>

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/trevornace/2018/04/09/yet-another-dead-whale-is-grave-reminder-of-our-massive-plastic-problem/?sh=337fe9786cd2>

Lauren Roman et al., "Plastic pollution is killing marine megafauna, but how do we prioritize policies to reduce mortality," *Conservation Letters* 14, no. 2 (December 3, 2020): <https://doi.org/10.1111/conl.12781>.