

Plastic Bag Bans and California's Drought

MAINTAINING REUSABLE BAGS IN HYGIENIC CONDITION CONSUMES PRECIOUS WATER RESOURCES

By Anthony van Leeuwen, 9 February 2014

On 17 January 2014, Governor Brown declared a Drought [State Of Emergency](#) for California which included a call on Californians to reduce water usage by 20%! In signing the declaration, Governor Brown stated "We can't make it rain, but we can be much better prepared for the terrible consequences that California's drought now threatens, including dramatically less water for our farms and communities and increased fires in both urban and rural areas. ... and I'm calling all Californians to conserve water in every way possible." (Brown, 2014)

Felicia Marcus, chairwoman of the [State Water Resources Control Board](#), stated "This is the most serious drought we've faced in modern times" and that we need to conserve the water we have for future use. Similarly, [State Department of Water Resources](#) Director Mark Cowin stated that there simply is not enough water to meet the needs of farmers, communities, and "the conservation efforts intended to save dwindling populations of salmon and other fish throughout Northern California". (Associated Press, 2014)

Since the Governor's declaration of a Drought, cities and counties have followed suit to urge residents to cut water consumption by up to 20%. For example, the City of Ventura has asked water customers to reduce water use by 10% and to fix that leaky faucet, stop that running toilet, and let the grass wither and die. (Martinez, 2014)

Since droughts are not new to Californians, most of the low-hanging fruit such as water saving shower heads, low-flow faucet aerators, and water saving toilets have already been installed. Therefore efforts to conserve water will be much harder, and will require changing personal habits and ways of doing things from washing dishes, doing laundry, to taking shorter showers, etc. There are many great articles that offer suggestions on how to save water such as "[Realistic ways to conserve water](#)" by Clyde W. Froehlich. (Froehlich, 2014)

Another great way to conserve water is described in the article titled "[Hey, California! Want to Conserve Water? Then Don't Ban Plastic Bags](#)" by Scott Shackford. The author states that "It's been well-established that bag bans will [barely make any dent](#) at all in the state's waste make-up or fix litter problems". The author goes on to argue that "We have a contradiction in environmental goals. If Californians do switch to reusable bags, in order to use them safely, the bags will need to be washed regularly, increasing residents' water consumption." The author goes on to conclude that "**The state of California's water supply is much more important than its consumption of plastic bags**" and that a ban on plastic bags runs counter to the need to conserve water. (Shackford, 2014) (Beeber, 2012)

So how much water is actually used to wash reusable bags? A worst case analysis was done in the BEACON Environmental Impact Report (EIR) for Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties. The EIR calculated

that a worst case total of 153,300,948 gallons of water are used per year or **123.7 gallons of water per person per year** to wash reusable bags. In the analysis it was assumed that 50% of reusable bags are hand washed and consume 1 gallon per bag per wash and that the other 50% of bags were machine washed with 19 bags per load and each load consumed 40 gallons of water. It was conservatively assumed that bags were washed once per month. (BEACON, 2013, p. 107) These results could easily be extrapolated to other counties and the state as a whole.

Not only do reusable bags require water to maintain them in a hygienic condition to prevent food borne illness and disease transmission, but paper bags and cotton reusable bags in particular require a lot of water compared to plastic carryout bags in the production of paper and the growing of cotton. It should also be noted, that water used to wash and sanitize reusable bags is a **recurring use** that continues year after year!

Conclusion

Solutions that require increased water use by residents in states such as California, Nevada, Arizona, and New Mexico where water is a scarce resource should be avoided if for no other reason than conservation of water resources and reserving excess capacity for future growth.

California municipalities and Counties that have implemented plastic carryout bag bans should consider rescinding bag bans in favor of conserving water. Cities and Counties considering bag bans should put the project on the shelf. The state of California should consider shelving legislation that would implement a statewide bag ban.

Public Officials who implement bag bans and then tell us to conserve water and who say that **every drop counts** should consider that the public is not stupid and can see through the hypocrisy! You simply cannot tell the public to conserve water and then mandate that households use reusable bags that when safely used increases household water consumption! Public officials who practice this kind of hypocrisy should be held accountable and removed from office at the next election or even recalled!

About the Author

Anthony van Leeuwen is the founder of the [Fight The Plastic Bag Ban](http://fighttheplasticbagban.com) website and writes extensively on the subject. He holds a bachelors and Master's degree in Electronics Engineering and has over 40 years of experience working in the federal government.

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