

Proposed mandatory phase out of single-use plastic shopping bags – submission by Plastic Diet.

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Plastic Diet is submitting in support of:

1. A mandatory phase-out of sale and distribution of single-use plastic shopping bags, which includes giving them away at no cost.
2. The extension of this phase-out to plastic bags of all densities, that is, offering no exemptions to bags above a certain thickness threshold.
3. No exemptions being offered to retailers. All retailers must be included in the ban in order for this to be a comprehensive and meaningful change.
4. The extension of the phase-out to include oxo-degradable, “biodegradable” and “compostable” bag options.
5. This ban to be the first of more steps towards addressing the problem of plastic production, consumption and pollution in Aotearoa New Zealand.

1. A mandatory phase-out of sale and distribution of single-use plastic shopping bags, which includes giving them away at no cost.

Of the options considered in the discussion paper, the only option that will achieve meaningful change in reducing plastic bag usage is for there to be a mandatory phase-out of sale and distribution of single-use plastic shopping bags. Evidence elsewhere, including with major supermarkets in Aotearoa New Zealand, has shown that voluntary mechanisms and non-regulatory approaches are ineffective in achieving long term waste minimisation. A

mandatory phase-out places legislative pressure on manufacturers and retailers to embrace a circular economy approach to the way they make products such as shopping bags, as they will be required under the Waste Minimisation Act 2008 to show a tangible product stewardship scheme for any products moving forward from the ban.

2. The extension of this phase-out to plastic bags of all densities, that is, offering no exemptions to bags above a certain thickness threshold.

The inclusion of a thickness threshold opens the door to manufacturers simply increasing the density of bags to continue to provide single-use options. We have seen such a case at Countdown, where the “reusable” alternative they are selling since their voluntary phase out of single-use plastic bags is just a thicker plastic. By putting in place a thickness threshold, there would inadvertently be a loophole created where manufacturers and retailers could argue that a thicker plastic bag such as this is considered reusable by nature of being above a specific micron count.

3. No exemptions being offered to retailers. All retailers must be included in the ban in order for this to be a comprehensive and meaningful change.

There is no need for smaller retailers to be excluded from the ban. Plastic bags are not the key part of a retailer's business, and there are many alternatives readily available. In addition, smaller retailers such as dairies, service stations and more generally sell fewer items in a transaction, so it is arguable whether they have an increased reliance on the bags. To our knowledge, and as ascertained in the discussion paper, there are little to no plastic bag manufacturers in Aotearoa New Zealand, thus it is unlikely that this ban will impact on jobs or smaller businesses.

4. The extension of the phase-out to include oxo-degradable, “biodegradable” and “compostable” bag options.

None of these so-called eco-friendly options address the consumption of single-use plastics, resulting in the same volume of waste. Plus, the misuse and lack of regulation of these terms can confuse the consumer and lead them to believe they are doing “the right thing”. Bags marketed as compostable, but made of plant or organic materials, can actually cause increased damage if they wind up in landfill as they release methane in the process of breaking down, increasing waste contributions to greenhouse gas emissions. In order to properly address the problem of waste we must actively strive to move away from the behaviour of consumption and disposal, and instead weave the ethic of reuse and refusal of waste products at the top of the waste hierarchy into societal behaviours.

5. This ban to be the first of more steps towards addressing the problem of plastic production, consumption and pollution in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Plastic Diet wishes to applaud this Government for taking action to implement the Waste Minimisation Act 2008 as it was initially intended. However, we urge the Minister to continue to consider products, outside of the scope of this submission, for designation as priority products under Section 23 of the Act. There are a number of wasteful products such as food take-away containers, plastic food packaging, the soft plastic bags used for bulk food shopping, and coffee cups (as examples) that would be easy “low hanging fruits” to investigate further legislative action on. In addition, there are a number of waste streams that should be further investigated with regards to how innovation can be used to come to a solution to address more complex issues. These waste streams include plastic straws and the plastic used to package pre-cut fruit and vegetables – these are significant for people who need them due to disability or physical needs, and we should therefore be investigating ways to innovate away from single use versions of these.

We would like to speak to this submission, should the opportunity arise.