

Plastic Carrier Bag Levy:

Friends of the Earth Scotland Briefing
August 2005



**Friends of
the Earth
Scotland**

What is the Environmental Levy Bill?

Liberal Democrat MSP Mike Pringle has lodged a Members' Bill in the Scottish Parliament which, if passed, will mean that shoppers will have to pay 10 pence if they want a lightweight plastic carrier bag for their shopping. The Environmental Levy Bill is aimed at changing consumer behaviour, reducing resource use and cutting waste and litter. It will also raise money for local authorities to use on environmental and recycling projects.

Why do Friends of the Earth Scotland support this Bill?

A recent calculation of Scotland's 'ecological footprint' showed that if the rest of the world were to consume resources at the same rate as we do then we would need two more planets to sustain us. It is vital that attitudes towards using and throwing away resources are changed. Plastic bags are just one symbol of our 'throwaway society' and charging for their use is an important step in changing consumer behaviour.

In Scotland, we currently use (and then sooner or later throw away) around one billion plastic bags every year. Were Mike Pringle's Bill to have the same kind of effects that the Irish levy has had, Scotland would make an estimated net saving of up to 800 million plastic bags per year.

What is the environmental impact of plastic bag use?

Energy use:

Every bag uses energy in its manufacture. The energy embodied in 8.7 lightweight plastic carrier bags is roughly equivalent to the energy used to drive a car one kilometre¹. So, a reduction of 800 million plastic bags in Scotland would be the equivalent to a reduction of 92 million car kilometres. A report produced for the Scottish Executive reports that energy consumption would fall were a levy to be introduced.²

Wildlife/littering:

It is estimated that every year, globally, over a million birds and 100,000 marine mammals and turtles die from entanglement or ingestion of plastics³. Post-mortems frequently find plastic bags amongst other plastic waste in the stomachs and intestines of dead sea mammals. According to the Marine Conservation Society's Beachwatch 2003 report, based on 135 kilometres of UK coastline, plastic items accounted for 50% of the litter found, including 5,831 plastic bags. This is equivalent to 43 plastic bags for every kilometre of coastline surveyed.⁴

Plastic bags can take up to 1000 years to break down and are highly persistent and visible pollutants. The British Antarctic Survey noted that plastic bags have gone: "from being rare in the late 80s and early 90s

¹ Nolan-ITU Pty Ltd 2002. *Plastic Shopping Bags – analysis of levies and environmental impacts*. Prepared for the Department of Environment and Heritage, Canberra, Australia.

² AEAT on behalf of Scottish Executive, July 2005. Proposed Plastic Bag Levy – Extended Impact Assessment Report

³ Laist, D. 1997. *Impacts of Marine Debris: entanglement of marine life in marine debris*. In Coe, J. and Rogers, D.B. (Eds.) *Marine Debris: sources, impacts and solutions*. Springer Series on Environmental Management.

⁴ <http://www.wildlifebritain.com/news.cfm/id/232>

to being almost everywhere, from Spitsbergen 78° North to Falklands 51° South ... they'll be washing up in Antarctica within the decade."⁵

How successful has a similar levy been in Ireland?

The Republic of Ireland brought in a similar levy in 2002, requiring customers to pay 9 pence per plastic bag. This tax led to 1 billion less plastic bags being consumed, a reduction of around 90%. And while the sales of some other forms of plastic bag did increase, the net overall reduction was still 930 million plastic bags, with an apparently insignificant increase in paper bag use as a substitute. Anecdotal evidence from Ireland overwhelmingly suggests that consumers switched to reusable bags – exactly the kind of change in behaviour that the levy was aiming to stimulate.

How have retailers in Ireland responded?

Retailers in Ireland are reported to have found the effects on their well being from the carrier bag levy as either neutral or positive and implementation costs being modest and “generally less than the savings resulting from not having to purchase bags”.⁶ Tesco Ireland have reported that: “Customers are telling us they broadly welcome the introduction of the levy. We have seen a marked change in customers' behaviour in anticipation of the new levy, reflected in the significant increase in sales of our re-usable bags.”

The Chambers of Commerce in Ireland similarly welcomed the Plastic Bags Levy: “The organisation believes that by charging the consumer, it will discourage the inefficient and environmentally unfriendly use of these bags and supports earmarking of funds collected for environmental projects. Charging for every plastic bag that a consumer uses is an effective practice operated in a number of other European countries, including Denmark, and it makes the user think of more environmentally friendly ways to package their goods.”⁷

Do the public support a plastic bag levy?

A public opinion poll carried out in Britain by MORI in 2003 showed that almost two thirds of the population support paying 10 pence for a carrier bag for their shopping⁸. MORI expressed surprise at the level of support given the UK's usual sensitivity to anything perceived as a ‘stealth’ tax. The survey also showed there is support for the idea from all political perspectives, with 73% of Liberal Democrat voters and 63% of Labour and Conservative voters being in favour of the charge.

What would the impact be for local authorities?

A report produced for the Scottish Executive concluded that the income generated from the tax would more than cover the costs incurred to local authorities of setting up and administering the schemes.⁹ There would also be money raised and ringfenced for environmental and recycling projects.

What impact would the levy have on consumers?

Analysis for the Scottish Executive has shown that the maximum that an individual might expect to pay in taxes on plastic bag use would be £10 per year.⁹ This is in the context of the average weekly household expenditure in Scotland being £365. Obviously since the tax is not compulsory, consumers could modify their behaviour to make use of re-usable bags and avoid the tax.

⁵ http://www.news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2003/09/0902_030902_plasticbags.html

⁶ Convery, F. and McDonnell, S. 2003. *Applying Environmental Product Taxes and Levies; lessons from the experience with the Irish Plastic Bags Levy*. Department of Environmental Studies, University College, Dublin, Ireland.

⁷ Tom Clarke, President of Chambers of Commerce Ireland. <http://www.chambersireland.ie/index.asp?docID=382> Plastic Bags Levy welcomed – call for use pays principle to also be applied to water. 2003.

⁸ <http://www.mori.com/polls/2003/meb1.shtml>

⁹ AEAT on behalf of Scottish Executive, July 2005. Proposed Plastic Bag Levy – Extended Impact Assessment Report

Friends of the Earth Scotland

Lamb's House, Burgess Street, Leith, Edinburgh, EH6 6RD

Tel 0131 554 9977 Fax 0131 554 8656 Email info@foe-scotland.org.uk Website www.foe-scotland.org.uk