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The war on shopping bags  
**Plastics of evil**

Mar 29th 2007 | SAN FRANCISCO  
From *The Economist* print edition

**San Francisco swaps polyethylene for potato starch**

"THIS day has been long in coming," declared Ross Mirkarimi on the steps of San Francisco's City Hall this week, flanked by compost bins and boxes of re-usable cloth bags. "We can take the steps to make our economy just a little more soulful. Karma is with us." The city he helps govern, in short, is ridding itself of the plastic shopping bag.

And quite right, too. They get caught in trees (hence the epithet "Witches' Knickers"), take hundreds of years to decompose and push up demand for oil, used to make plastics. Outlawing plastic bags in San Francisco alone will reduce oil consumption by nearly 800,000 gallons a year, the city reckons. Less than 5% of the 100 billion bags thrown away by Americans each year are recycled.

Jared Blumenfeld, head of the

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San Francisco's environment department posts [documents explaining the compostable bag scheme](#).

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city's environment department, says the ban will reduce litter and the cost of clearing it: sending a worker out to pull bags from trees costs up to \$150 a time. And the recycled-paper and compostable bags that must be used from now on—made from corn starch or potato starch—will help to shift food waste from landfill to compost bins. People would do a lot more composting, he says, if they had biodegradable bags to help them. He expects the move to bring San Francisco's overall recycling rate—at 69% more than twice New York's—close to 80%.



Other cities may now follow suit. Los Angeles, Santa Monica, Oakland and, naturally, Berkeley are exploring similar moves. There is some talk of restrictions or a tax in New York. The plastic-bag lobby fought hard to stop a ban in San Francisco precisely because it feared that defeat there would start a nationwide trend.

This is one area of greenery where California cannot claim to be the global leader. In Taiwan and Ireland, you pay for plastic bags. They have been banned already in Rwanda, Bhutan, Bangladesh (where they cause flooding by blocking drains), South Africa (where distributing them can land you in jail) and Mumbai. Paris will join the list at the end of this year, the rest of France in 2010. But bags are only the start: much more landfill is taken up with packaging. Now that would be some good karma.

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