

Single-Use Plastic Waste Reduction

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Executive Summary

In an effort to reduce plastic waste and address the environmental problems it creates, the Nova Scotia Government recently introduced The Plastic Bags Reduction Act (Bill 152). So far, the legislation has specifically banned plastic bags, but will continue to add other items over time. This could include things such as takeout containers, straws, and stir sticks.

There is a large body of research that clearly identifies the need to reduce plastic waste. The amount of plastic entering our waste stream across the globe is staggering. Unfortunately, a large percentage of plastic waste is not disposed of properly and ends up in our natural environment. This waste disrupts the beauty of our landscape and is detrimental to the well-being of wildlife and people.

Many countries across the globe, including Canada have begun taking measures to address the need to reduce plastic waste. Legislation banning single-use items has been emerging in many cities, provinces, and countries. While this legislation is promising, it is all very new.

It is still too soon to measure the effectiveness and impacts of this new legislation, however Nova Scotia should carefully monitor what is happening in other areas. As Nova Scotia continues to implement legislation regarding plastic waste reduction, the successes and failures of other jurisdictions can be important tools in helping decision makers choose how to proceed next.

The Plastic Bags Reduction Act (Bill 152) was recently introduced by the Nova Scotia government. In an effort to reduce plastic waste, the legislation bans single-use plastic checkout

bags. Although not specifically identified, the legislation also allows the government to ban other single-use products. This could include things such as straws, stir sticks, cotton swabs, disposable cups, or takeout containers. Beyond plastic bags, our government must decide the next steps in implementing the legislation, and which product to focus their attention on next.

Banning single-use plastic items is an important step toward sustaining our environment. It has been widely quoted that there will be more plastic in the ocean than fish by 2050! This statistic comes from a 2016 report by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, *The New Plastic Economy - Rethinking the Future of Plastic*. The report also claims that new plastics will consume 20 percent of all oil production within 35 years, and that plastics production is expected to quadruple by 2050. Globally just five percent of plastics are recycled effectively, and forty percent end up in landfill. A third are scattered across the globe, where they negatively impact the natural environment. Findings from this study have been quoted widely by politicians, and have influenced decisions around the globe.

Research such as this draws attention for global action to address plastic waste, and many countries have implemented measures that tackle single-use plastics specifically. For example, India has declared that it will eliminate all single-use plastic by 2022, Peru has banned all single-use plastics to their protected and cultural areas, Washington D.C has banned plastic straws, and San Diego has banned styrofoam food and drink containers. Furthermore, Kenya and Bangladesh have banned plastic bags, and France has banned disposable plastic containers, cutlery and plastic bags. In March 2019, The European Union committed to banning the most common single-use plastic items found littered on their shorelines (Howard, 2019).

Here in Canada, the government has implemented the Canada-Wide Action Plan on Zero Plastic Waste, which hopes to lessen the negative impacts of plastic waste through a variety of measures. This includes waste prevention and reduction as well as recycling (CCME, 2019). Canada also introduced the Oceans Plastic Charter, an agreement with other nations to ensure plastics are designed for reuse and recycling globally.

Across Canada, some provinces and cities have begun implementing their own measures to reduce single-use plastic waste. Along with Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland and Labrador have also introduced plastic bag bans. The cities of Montreal and Vancouver also have similar bans (Marchild, 2019). Within Canada, Vancouver is a national leader, with a goal of reaching zero waste by 2040. In addition to bags they have already banned straws, and foam and foam takeout containers (Green Vancouver, 2020).

A ban of any of the items mentioned previously would be beneficial, as these products are commonly seen littered along our beaches and highways. While promising, these policies are all very new so it is too soon to gauge their level of success. Very little research exists regarding the results of these initiatives. Therefore, it is important for the Nova Scotia government to closely monitor what is happening in other jurisdictions, and learn from their successes and failures. The government should also analyse our own personal waste stream when deciding which products should be banned next. In a recent Nova Scotia waste audit, it was determined that approximately 90 percent of litter contains plastic, consisting largely of food packaging, wrapper, bags, straws and disposable cups (David, 2020). It would be wise to consider this data when planning future initiatives.

It is worth noting that Nova Scotia is already considered a world leader when it comes to waste reduction. In 2000 we became the first province to divert 50 percent of waste from landfills, gaining recognition globally. The amount of waste Nova Scotians currently send to the landfill is half of the national average. Furthermore, our government has implemented effective energy efficiency programs that prevent one million tonnes of greenhouse gasses from being released into the atmosphere every year (Nova Scotia Government, 2019).

Efforts by the government to continue to ban single-use plastics should be well received, according to results of a recent survey by Narrative Research. The survey included 1500 Atlantic Canadians who largely supported a ban on items such as bags, straws, cups, cutlery, and takeaway food containers (Chronicle Herald, 2019). This is reassuring, as public support will be an essential factor regarding the success or failure of any initiatives the government chooses to implement.

Even with public support, there will be challenges and barriers to consider when implementing regulations to reduce plastic use. In spite of it being a great source of waste, plastic is considered by many to be a valuable resource. It is cheap, functional, and durable. It is an important component in many aspects of our lives. In Canada, the plastic industry employs 100,000 people and is a \$35 billion dollar industry (Government of Canada, 2020). Any effort to reduce plastic waste could be perceived as a threat to people employed in this industry, and resistance from this group should be expected.

The food service industry will also be impacted, as it is believed that single-use packaging is necessary to adequately meet customer needs. It is affordable, helps restaurant owners adhere to strict food safety codes, and protects food (Erjavec, 2020). If restaurants are no

longer permitted to use single-use plastics, the increased costs they incur from using alternatives would be reflected in the prices customers pay for products.

The government should be mindful of various sectors that may face challenges by new policies, and offer support to these groups as part of the overall implementation strategy. However, it is important that all governments, locally and internationally, take efforts to address the growing environmental problem that plastic waste is creating before it is too late. In 2016, 29,000 tonnes of plastic waste made its way into the Canadian natural environment, contaminating our waterways, forests, and air (Government of Canada 2020).

A 2020 report from the Government of Canada, *Draft Science Assessment of Plastic Pollution* clearly identifies the harmful effects of plastic pollution on our environment, the economy, and human health. Wildlife often become injured by mistaking larger pieces of plastic waste for food. These animals also ingest the plastic, which not only makes them sick, but can also cause it to end up in seafood consumed by humans. The report also addresses microplastic pollution, which has the potential to cause serious illness in humans. Plastic production also produces greenhouse gas emissions, contributing to the climate crisis.

Regulating single-use plastics can have enormous benefits for our health and environment. Sadly, Canadians throw away over 3 million tonnes of plastic waste every year (Government of Canada 2020). If the government doesn't implement policies to regulate waste, it will continue to contaminate habitats, harm wildlife, and litter or beautiful natural spaces.

Policies, like those that ban single-use plastics, are important to people of all ages, especially the younger generation who have many years left to exist on this planet. Even before they are old enough to vote, youth can influence policy development. For example, Greta

Thunberg was recently voted by *Time* as the 2019 person of the year. She was only 15 years old when she staged a school strike in front of the Swedish Parliament, protesting government inaction on climate change. Since that time she has connected over 4 million people in the largest climate strike in history (Haynes,, 2020).

Here in Canada, our “Water Warrior” Autumn Pelrier of the Wiikwemkoong First Nation in Northern Ontario has drawn attention to the lack of clean water in many Indigenous communities. Beyond her own community, she has been advocating on a global scale about the importance of clean water for everyone as a basic human right (Adina, 2019).

Through their activism, these teens have engaged international audiences, raising environmental awareness for people of all ages. Through education, they influence policy development by sending a strong message to politicians and leaders about causes that people are passionate about. Along with education initiatives, youth can lobby politicians about causes they feel deeply about, and help out on election campaigns for political parties aligning with their personal views. Young people can also hold fundraisers to support a specific issue they feel passionate about. There is no minimum age for becoming engaged in political issues, and trying to influence policy development.

Clearly, plastic waste is an important concern for Nova Scotians. Banning plastic bags was an important start to this necessary waste reduction strategy. Moving forward, our government must continue to study and monitor initiatives that are occurring in other jurisdictions, and make decisions that are in the best interest of Nova Scotians. The natural beauty of our province, and the health and wellbeing of our citizens and wildlife are valuable, and need to be protected.

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