

Addressing the Plastic Film Issue

In Nova Scotia

Travis M. Goswell

Sackville High School

Grade 12

### Executive Summary

The overuse and production of plastic films, including shopping bags and other plastic wraps has always posed a significant threat to the environment. As more time passes, and more plastics are produced, this threat grows exponentially. Though Nova Scotia has been an international leader in this field, recent changes in international recycling markets have left a large stockpile of plastic film in recycling facilities across the province.

In July of 2017, China told the World Trade Organization that it would no longer be accepting shipments of film plastics because of environmental and health concerns. With no place to send the plastic film, the stockpile continues to grow. The Halifax Regional Municipality has even attempted to get permission from the province to burn or landfill the plastics. Obviously these both are not ideal solutions as plastics have a huge negative impact on the environment. It is therefore up to the province to find another solution, and to overcome the plastic film issue. Nova Scotia must implement new programs or policies to reduce the use the plastic films, and individual waste management stakeholders must play a role in improving the current situation.

There are many options to explore when it comes to reducing, or eliminating, the use of plastic bags, and other single-use plastics. One of the most popular options is a province-wide ban on plastic bags, or mandatory fee customers must pay when using plastic bags. It is also important to target single-use plastics such as: straws, cups, and bottles. Placing a limit on the

amount of single-use plastics that a company, or retailer, can produce, would greatly decrease the overall amount of plastic film in the province.

Education plays a huge role in getting the rest of the province on board with the idea of reducing plastic film. Holding mandatory lessons for employees in companies who may use or produce plastic film materials would reach a large percentage of citizens. Also adding more environmental information to the public school curriculum will educate the future generation on this issue.

### Addressing the Plastic Film Issue

One of the most massive environmental threats to date is the overuse and overproduction of plastic film. It is extremely difficult to avoid using any form of plastic for even a day. Though Nova Scotia is considered an example of how to properly handle garbage and recycling, this problem affects the province greatly. Recent changes in international recycling markets have left many recycling facilities in Nova Scotia with a stockpile of plastic film. These changes have stimulated a lot of discussion about ways to reduce or eliminate plastic films. Following these ideas, Nova Scotia will be able to overcome the plastic film recycling challenge: a ban or mandatory fee on plastic shopping bags, placing restrictions on the amount of plastic companies can produce, implementing further education about plastic film into public school curriculum, and mandatory public education programs for all employees working in a plastic-related industry. While these ideals may seem harsh, it is extremely important to implement them in Nova Scotia to combat the major problems caused by the overproduction of plastic film.

The question of whether or not to implement a complete ban, mandatory fee, or take no action on the distribution of plastic shopping bags by retailers is one that has been heavily debated by the Nova Scotian government for years. Due the ban of plastic film imports from China, this debate has quickly accelerated. In order to combat the stockpiles of plastic film, it is important to take action on the distribution of plastic shopping bags. There are two options for the Nova Scotia government to consider when attempting to find a solution to this issue, completely eliminate or significantly reduce the production of single-use plastic shopping bags by retailers (Mancini, 2017).

In order to eliminate the use of plastic shopping bags, the Nova Scotian government would have to implement a complete ban on plastic shopping bags. This option would prohibit retailers from distributing plastic bags through municipal law. Alternative carryout bags, such as paper or reusable bags, could be provided by retailers for free or for a charge. This option has been continuously supported by environmental groups as the most effective option to reduce plastic bags. This option is very possible, especially in Atlantic Canada, where sixty-three percent of citizens voted in favor of a complete ban on plastic bags, showing very high support for this option. This option is also supported by the actions of Montreal, where the ban on plastic bags was implemented at the beginning of 2018. By giving companies a grace period of six months to comply, this ban has been very successful (Henriquez, 2018). A complete ban on the distribution of single-use plastic shopping bags in Nova Scotia would eliminate the use plastic shopping bags, and greatly reduce the production of plastic film throughout the province.

In order to reduce the use of plastic shopping bags the Nova Scotia government would have to either impose a mandatory fee for the use of plastic shopping bags, or impose a partial ban. With the mandatory fee option, a municipal by-law would implement a fee for single-use shopping bags (Paetkau, 2017). This would either include a retailer-imposed fee, where the consumer pays a fee for each bag provided at the checkout, or an imposed levy for plastic shopping bags, where retailers are charged per plastic bag distributed. It is also important to note that this last option is not currently possible as the Halifax Regional Municipality lacks sufficient legislative authority to impose a levy, but it is possible for the municipality to attain this level of authority in the future. If this type of by-law were to be implemented, monitoring and enforcement for compliance would need to consistently take place. A partial ban would consist

of either imposing paper bags on consumers at the checkout, where the retailer would pay, or imposing reusable bags on consumers, where the consumer pays and/or must bring their own bag. Imposing either a mandatory fee or a partial ban on the use of plastic shopping bags would significantly reduce the stockpiling of single-use plastic bags, without risking the detrimental economic implications for residents, retailers, and the plastic bag manufacturing industry that a complete ban may introduce (Mancini, 2017).

When discussing elimination or reduction options for single-use plastic shopping bags, it is important to consider public education options as well. Under any form of a partial ban, or mandatory fee, municipalities must depend on retailers to communicate with and educate the public about the measures in place. Similarly, elimination options would have to be communicated to customers by retailers at the point-of-sale. Municipalities would have to, therefore, educate retailers and provide them with outreach materials to distribute to customers. Choosing to implement public education along with a ban, or mandatory fee, would require municipalities to hire additional staff to adequately achieve and evaluate the intended educational outcomes. While this option may have financial implications for municipalities, it is imperative that the Nova Scotia government expand the budget to improve such a consequential issue (Mancini, 2017).

While the headlines on all forms of the media are dominated by the grocery bag issue, the problem should be more associated with all single-use plastics, such as: straws, bottles, and cups. The overproduction and use of these materials are heavily fueling the plastic film recycling issue as well. Placing restrictions on the amount of single-use plastics that a company, or retailer, can

produce, or use for packaging purposes could greatly reduce the distribution of single-use plastics in Nova Scotia. Following the steps the Canadian government, and other international governments, took to place restrictions on fossil fuel emissions, this idea could quickly become a reality. Placing restrictions on plastic film production would greatly reduce the amount of single-use plastics arriving in stockpiles in Nova Scotia (Tattrie, 2018).

The plastic film recycling issue is growing, and only adding to the massive amount of environmental problems that threaten the Earth. A trend that has been proven throughout many years of studies and research is that children and teenagers are at the most influential stages of their life. The upcoming generation is the generation that must fix all of these environmental issues, and therefore they must be educated on the types of implications that pose a significant threat. Implementing more principles revolving around waste reduction, sustainability, and local environmental initiatives would reach the majority of influential children and teens. This will further immerse students in local environmental issues, and teach them the consequences of taking no action. A generation of educated young adults would undoubtedly improve the plastic film recycling issue in Nova Scotia (NS Curriculum Documents Portal, 2002).

The most important part of getting a society to shift its current way of life, is public education. Most of the Nova Scotian population is probably unaware of the harm that the overproduction and use of plastic film is causing. Introducing a comprehensive education and communication plan into the general public, focusing on reducing the use of single-use plastics, reusing plastic film items where possible, and recycling plastics at the end of their life, would reach many civilians and educate them on the local environmental issues that plastic films are

causing. By making this type of public education mandatory for all Nova Scotian citizens working for a company that has any connection to the plastic film industry, would reach a large percentage of the population. The large scale public education of plastic film reduction and the consequences plastic film has on the environment, would greatly aid in the plastic film recycling issue in Nova Scotia.

The threat of plastic film has remained active for years across the globe. Due to recent changes in international recycling markets, however, this threat has grown exponentially. Recycling facilities in Nova Scotia have been left with stockpiles of plastic bags and other single-use plastics. With Nova Scotian municipalities attempting to get permission to burn, or even landfill these plastics; it is time to take charge. By considering these ideas, Nova Scotia will be able to overcome the plastic film recycling issue: imposing a ban or mandatory fee on plastic shopping bags, placing restrictions on the production of single-use plastics, implementing plastic film reduction and its environmental impacts into the public school curriculum, and introducing a comprehensive education and communication plan into the general public. In order to combat the growing plastic film recycling issue in Nova Scotia, it is critical that at least one, or all, of these ideas are considered and implemented into society.

## References

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