

Proof that plastic bags are greener than paper?

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It is a counterattack one might have expected from plastics bag manufacturers themselves. But it is not the plastics industry that has asked the Federal Trade Commission to stop Whole Foods Market Inc. from making false claims regarding the environmental superiority of paper bags to plastic bags, but an environmental group based in Sacramento, Calif.

In a letter to FTC dated April 9, Steve Hamilton, president of the Environmental Affairs Council, argues that Whole Food "lacks credible and objective scientific evidence demonstrating that . . . plastic bags are more harmful to the environment than the use of paper bags."

Whole Food has said that it will stop distributing plastic carryout bags April 22 in favor of paper bags to "help protect the environment and conserve resources,"-- an assertion that Hamilton calls "feel good environmentalism at its worst."

"This paper vs. plastics debate is a serious, complicated and unsettled scientific issue undeserving of such simple and deceptive treatment," said the letter, written by Hamilton, who formerly worked for several environmental and energy organizations including the South Coast Air Quality Management District Office.

"Whole Foods' false and unsubstantiated anti-plastics publicity stunt is yet another example of a purportedly environmentally friendly corporation greenwashing the general public," said the letter. "Contrary to the message behind Whole Foods' marketing scheme, credible and objective scientific evidence establishes that plastic bags generally cause less adverse environmental impact than paper bags," said the letter.

EAC pointed to an Environmental Protection Agency report, often cited by industry, which says that 40 per cent less energy is needed to produce plastic grocery bags and that their production generates 80 percent less solid waste. The letter also cited additional data in that same study that production of paper bags produce 70 percent more air and 50 times more water pollutants than the manufacture of plastic bags and that it takes 91 percent less energy to recycle a pound of plastic than it takes to recycle a pound of paper.

The letter also cited data from other scientific studies that show plastic bags produce less greenhouse gas and consumer far less water in manufacturing.

In addition, because paper bags are ten times heavier than a plastic bag of equivalent size, EAC said that that means the use of "more packaging, which leads to less efficient transport and greater energy costs and emissions. Such secondary environmental impact cannot be discounted in determining whether Whole Foods has misled consumers."

The letter to EAC also said that Whole Foods' falsely asserts that its paper grocery bags are made from 100 recycled paper and contains 100 percent recycled fiber from post-consumer and post-industrial waste.

Only 40 percent of the content of the paper bags comes from post-consumer fibers, according to Duro Bag Manufacturing Co., which makes the paper bags for Whole Foods. The rest comes from post-industrial fibers, according to the EAC letter.

Neither Duro nor Whole Foods has not responded to the charges in EAC's letter to FTC.

EAC has asked FTC to order Whole Foods to retract its unsubstantiated and derogatory statements regarding plastic bags, to stop falsely representing the recycled content of its paper bags and to prohibit the grocery chain from providing misleading information regarding the environmental benefit of its shopping bags.

We don't know if FTC will take up EAC's complaint. But its very existence seems to open up the door for similar counterattacks in other cities when anti plastic bag legislation or initiatives based on environmental claims arise.