

# Plastic Bags

## Frequently Asked Questions

### What is considered a 'soft plastic'?

Any type of plastic wrap or bag that is easily scrunched up. These items can include:

- clear food wrap
- bread bags
- toilet paper wrapping
- chip packets
- muesli bar wrappers
- shopping bags (supermarket, clothes stores etc)

### Are soft plastics recyclable?

Almost anything is recyclable if there is someone who wants to turn it into something new.

Waste management companies partly fund their business by selling recyclable items to other companies to make new things. Items such as glass bottles and jars are the best because they can be recycled into new glass without too much effort or extra material.

Currently the market is very limited with only a few international companies interested in purchasing soft plastic. This is for a number of reasons which include:

- It is often cheaper to make new soft plastics than to recycle them
- Soft plastics take up lots of room for small volumes of actual plastic. This means storage and shipping costs can outweigh the value of the recyclable items
- Recycling plastic into new plastic can be costly as it requires other expensive material such as oil

### Why are soft plastics so harmful to the environment?

Environmental harm is the result of how we use items such as soft plastics. Where these products are properly managed the risk is low. However, soft plastics are usually lightweight making it easy for them to be transported into the environment by wind or water if not properly controlled. The plastics are harmful to animals causing intestinal tract blockages, strangulation and suffocation. In 2012 an endangered green sea turtle found dead on Motuihe Island in Hauraki Gulf contained 58 pieces of plastic, mostly from plastic bags.

Plastic bags do not decompose or biodegrade because the microorganisms that are part of the process are not able to use the plastic as food. The bags may break down in sunlight (photodegrade) but small fragments will remain which are toxic.

### Why can't I put soft plastics in the yellow-lidded recycling bin?

All the items that you place in the yellow-lidded bin are compacted in Rotorua and shipped to Kopu to the Material Recovery Facility (MRF).

[Click here to watch a video about the MRF in Kopu](#)

At the MRF the recycling is sent through various machines to sort the items. Soft plastics can become stuck in the machines, causing damage and delays because it means workers have to shut down equipment and manually cut away the soft plastics that become wrapped around and stuck in the equipment.

The MRF also has a machine that separates the lighter items (paper and cardboard) from the heavier items like plastic and metal. Because soft plastics are lightweight they can become mixed up with the paper and cardboard which is considered 'contamination' and can result in the entire load being rejected by the recycling purchaser.

If that happens, the whole load goes to landfill.

### **Is it usual practice for councils to not take plastic bags?**

Most councils do not accept soft plastics as recycling. Some companies and organisations choose to collect the soft plastics but will be send them to landfill with the general refuse.

The Soft Plastic Recycling Programme is an industry initiative that is in place in some locations around New Zealand. It works with local stores such as supermarkets and The Warehouse to offer a place for customers to return their soft plastics.

The soft plastics collected from the stores is then shipped to a company in Melbourne called Replas which creates plastic items such as outdoor furniture, bollards, signage and more. This service is not currently offered in Rotorua but some local stores do accept returned bags and other soft plastics.

### **Which stores currently collect soft plastics and do they take any soft plastics?**

All three Countdown supermarkets in Rotorua accept returned plastic bags.

### **Why doesn't Council just ban plastic bags?**

Council's options are limited when it comes to getting rid of plastic bags. Council can encourage reduced use of plastic bags but cannot legally ban them or introduce a levy or tax. Other councils which have tried to introduce a bylaw have been rejected because of section 155 of the Local Government Act 2002 which requires bylaws to be used only when they are the most appropriate way of addressing a problem.

Only Central Government can pass legislation to combat what is considered a national issue.

Currently groups are lobbying the Government to consider a plastic bag levy which would mean people would have to pay extra for plastic bags. A similar levy in the United Kingdom has led to an 85% drop in plastic bag usage since it was introduced.

A petition supporting this has been signed by 28 Mayors from around New Zealand including Rotorua Mayor Steve Chadwick.

### **Why can't Rotorua Lakes Council just do its own thing?**

Council's waste team are considering options that are economically and logistically viable for Rotorua.

The team have been in contact with the Soft Plastics Recycling Programme to try and bring the service to Rotorua. At this time it is available only in a few places around the country such as Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch with Rotorua in future plans.

Another option is to establish a soft plastic collection and bailing facility in Rotorua. This option requires more research as it Council would need to find a buyer and cover the cost of construction of a facility, storage as well as incurring overseas export costs.

### **How can I help reduce the amount of soft plastics going to landfill?**

While groups across the country are lobbying to either ban plastic bags or introduce a plastic bag levy, communities can have help by reducing the amount of soft plastics they use each day. Take up the challenge to use alternatives such as reusable fabric shopping bags, glass lunch containers or paper lunch wrap.

[Click here for information on how to reduce the amount of plastic you use.](#)