

# Bagging a Greener Future



China's radical plastic bag policy, which came into effect last year, has started showing results, according to *Martha Grossman*.

**W**HILE THE WESTERN WORLD is quick to cast judgement on China's current capacity to create a more environmentally harmonious future for its citizens (Beijing's pollution levels certainly came to the media forefront during the 2008 Olympic Games), the new plastic bag regulation marks a symbolic starting point for China's consumers and positions the country as a leader compared to many of its global peers.

China's plastic bag policy came into effect on 1 June 2008. It disallows the production of ultra-thin plastic bags and prohibits shops, supermarkets and trade markets from distributing free carriers.

Retailers who flout the policy by providing shoppers with free plastic bags are liable to be fined up to Rmb10,000. The policy provides that retailers are authorised to set their own prices for plastic bags, although rates cannot fall below cost price.

## Impact of Regulation

Prohibition on the production of these ultra-thin plastic bags has ensured a new set of national standards for plastic shopping bags used in retail facilities. The Chinese government has also placed more strict limitations on legally incorporated plastic bag producers in China.

Following the announcement of the regulation on 8 January 2008, the Chinese media reported the closure of Huaqiang Plastic Co, the country's largest plastic bag manufacturer later that month. At least 98 per cent of the bags it produced were rendered illegal by the regulation. The company has now reopened under a new name, Huiqiang Plastic Co, although its operations have changed and reduced significantly.

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges of the new policy is its downstream applica-

tion at Chinese wet markets. Article 2 of the policy stipulates that the prohibition of free plastic bags extends to 'trade markets', which includes wet markets – generally referring to an open food market environment. However, the majority of wet markets still provide free bags in violation of the regulation.

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Vendor farmers are reluctant to charge for bags for fear that it may destroy their business, particularly in light of the current economic situation.

An added burden for the Chinese government is its inability to police non-compliance of the law in wet market settings. Despite these concerns, it is certainly true that the use and distribution of ultra-thin carriers have reduced in China's markets, reinforced by the fact that market proprietors face substantial fines if they fail to buy their bags from legally-incorporated producers.

As always, long term success will depend on the government's commitment and capacity to enforce regulations.

It is an unfortunate fact that plastic bags appears to have the developing economies by the throat – including countries like South Africa, Uganda and Bangladesh. Most governments claim to have "taken action"

to discourage the use of plastic, but their regulations have by no means created any perceptible change for the better.

In Australia for example, statistics indicate that 90 per cent of retailers have signed up to the government's voluntary programme to reduce plastic bag use. The onus, however, falls on the consumer to modify his or her shopping practices rather than the retailer. Only a small number of supermarkets have elected to place a total ban on plastic bags. Voluntary programmes such as these provide no consistency for shoppers and therefore fail to create significant change in consumer practices. There is also a view that large multinational retailers should be held more responsible to reduce the use of plastic bags and change consumer behaviour.

## China Scores Better

In the war on plastics, China seems to have done better than many countries as statistics suggest. Figures distributed by the Economic Daily indicate that according to a recent study, the number of plastic bags used in everyday retailing in China has decreased by 60 per cent due to the ban on free polybags. The reduction has reached up to 80 per cent in shopping malls and supermarkets located in large cities such as Beijing, Shanghai and Shenzhen.

We all know that a plastic bag policy is but a small step in addressing China's capacity to reduce carbon emissions but it does show the nation's capacity to act in a determined way and with real effect once a decision has been taken. **SBR**

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