17 August 2012

“BREAK THE BAG HABIT” CAMPAIGN

Dear (name here),

Our industry member businesses are located in more than 150 UK constituencies. We are writing to register our surprise and concern that Keep Britain Tidy, Marine Conservation Society and Council for the Protection of Rural England have launched a campaign to “Break the Bag Habit” without any scientific justification and in direct contradiction of the findings of the UK Environment Agency (science report SC030148). We believe this is nothing more than a cynical move which uses greenwash and misinformation in an attempt to replace their significant fall in government financial support and public donations by supporting a potential tax which may effectively generate funds for their own use.

We appeal to UK Members of Parliament to withhold support from this campaign and stand by the voluntary agreement which Government signed jointly with the retail sector and our industry and which has already successfully reduced the carbon impacts of plastic carrier bags by around 60% through a number of major initiatives and to at the same time call for more focus on reuse, and encouraging consumers to use the 5000 recycling points that exist when a bag reaches its end of life..

The rigorous Environment Agency Life Cycle Analysis clearly demonstrates that alternatives to the lightweight plastic bag require far more of the earth’s precious resources to produce and have far higher impacts across a life cycle. We believe this new campaign is a blatant misrepresentation of the facts contained in this report and by targeting carrier bags diverts attention and resources from the macro-environmental issues we face.

We ask you to recognise that, by extrapolating the Environment Agency analysis, the UK’s entire annual consumption of 6.5 billion plastic carrier bags (already halved from 13 billion by our voluntary action) has equivalent carbon impacts to just one average 8 mile journey for every car in the UK. Put another way, the entire annual UK plastic carrier bag consumption has the same carbon impacts as around 2 hours of flight.
activity at Heathrow Airport. This EA report also demonstrates that each cotton or jute alternative bag has to be used no fewer than 173 times before its enormous environmental impacts fall as low as the humble plastic supermarket carrier.

So where should our real environmental priorities lie? Of course litter should be one of them but why is Keep Britain Tidy targeting carrier bags when surveys show they represent just 0.03% of littered items in our environment (Keep Britain Tidy for Incpen as part of the Local Environmental Quality Survey for England (2008-9).

By repeating myths and misinformation about the significance of plastic carrier bags in the environment, this campaign not only diverts attention from important environmental issues but also encourage a switch to heavier, higher impact alternatives which will not be recycled and are more likely to add more waste to landfill (plastic bags are just 0.025% of landfill or 0.2% of the average dustbin).

Good environmental practice is about reducing impacts, reusing resources and recycling at the end of life. The plastic carrier bag offers all of these routes to becoming the most environmentally acceptable solution for carrying goods home because it has the lowest impacts in production and transportation, is re-used by around 80% of households - for example as a bin bag (DEFRA/WRAP/IPSOS/MORI 2007 Studies) and can easily be recycled using more than 5,000 collection points at our supermarkets.

If we are ever going to make progress in tackling issues of waste and environmental awareness, we need joined up thinking based on sound science. Please encourage a focus on the things that really matter in the search for sustainability. Bashing plastic bags is not getting us anywhere other than risking that consumers start using bags that will have a more detrimental impact and we would appreciate your support in getting this message across. We attach our latest Fast Facts about Plastic Bags Leaflet.

Yours,

Barry Turner, CEO, Packaging & Films Association. Paul Marmot, Chairman, Carrier Bag Consortium