

# In-Store Plastic Bag Recycling, Reuse and Conservation Toolkit

## Best Practices For Alaska's Retailers



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## **INTRODUCTION:**

Alaskans for Litter Prevention and Recycling (ALPAR) is partnering with businesses in Alaska to create positive change in our communities by helping to insure that plastic bags are recycled, reused and disposed of properly. Our members and Alaska's consumers and retailers recognize that more should and can be done to address environmental concerns regarding plastic bags. Our goal is to create solutions that reduce the number of plastic bags that end up in our landfills and as litter in our land and marine environments.

ALPAR along with Alaska's communities, civic organizations and volunteers have come a long way in the past 25 years making litter clean up and prevention a high priority. Volunteer community clean-ups, ALPAR Youth Litter Patrols and a host of other cleanup programs targeting beaches, creeks and rivers, parks, highways, roads, trails and pathways keep Alaska beautiful and litter free every year.

ALPAR has developed this Best Practices Toolkit for retailers interested in offering their customers new options for managing the use and disposal of plastic shopping bags. It brings together practices already in use in many retail outlets throughout North America.

## **BENEFITS OF PLASTIC BAGS AND PLASTIC BAG RECYCLING:**

Plastic carryout bags are very lightweight, strong, waterproof and convenient. They offer environmental advantages over paper bags as well as many opportunities for reusing as shopping bags, lunch containers, waste can liners, carry-alls or for cleaning up after pets.

Since the early 90's, plastic bag and film recycling for residents in Anchorage, the MatSu Valley and Kenai has been available through community drop-offs centers. Since then, several of the large retailers have instituted collection programs for disposable shopping bags at their stores as well: Fred Meyer, Carrs/Safeway and WalMart all currently have take back programs in place. Other areas of Alaska are looking to institute new or enhanced programs to recycle plastic bags and reduce the number of those bags in our landfills or that might become litter through poor disposal habits.

Plastic bags are a highly recyclable resource. Many recovered bags are slated for the rapidly growing plastic lumber and building material markets to be used for such products as decking, fencing, railing, and outdoor furniture. Some are also recycled into new bags and other products.

## **WHY YOUR COMPANY SHOULD GET INVOLVED:**

Offering your customers a way to recycle their plastic bags and giving them a choice to use them again or opt for reusable bags will:

- help to improve your store's public image; and
- translate into added customer service.

Plus, pallet distribution wrap can be recycled as part of this same stream, thereby eliminating disposal costs for this film.

Alaskans want to recycle! In 2004, over 60 percent of households in Anchorage recycled and the number is growing. Through your bag recycling and conservation programs, you will be offering a reasonable and effective alternative to government regulation that could see bags banned or taxed. The Alaska Legislature has considered bills in both the House and Senate proposing a 15 cent per bag tax on all disposable plastic shopping bags. By adopting recycling and conservation programs voluntarily, your business sends a strong message to the government on your commitment to product stewardship.

This Best Practices Guide will address two programs to manage plastic bag use:

- I. In-Store Collection for Recycling
- II. Encouraging Reuse and Conservation

## **I. Starting an In-Store Collection Program for Recycling**

There are six key steps in launching an in-store plastic bag collection program:

1. Finding a market or recycler and arranging transport
2. Setting up Bins
3. Consolidation of Bags
4. Baling
5. Costs & Benefits
6. Consumer Education

### **1. Finding a market or recycler and arranging transport**

One of the first things to be done before launching your program is to confirm an end market for your recovered plastic bags and an efficient method of transport. Retailers have the option of dealing directly with end markets or arranging recycling with their waste management firms or a recycling center who brokers the bags to the end markets. The decision is often based on material volumes. Only very high volume retailers would normally sell directly to end markets. Lower volume retailers would usually work with a waste hauler or recycling center who consolidates material from other retailers and community drop-offs to create full loads which are then sold into the market.

Hauling tips:

- Ask your recycler or hauler who picks up cardboard if they would be willing to pick up plastic film with the cardboard.
- Consider hauling to the recycling center yourself.
- Consider partnering with neighboring businesses who generate plastic film, so that you can entice a hauling company to service multiple accounts at a discount.
- Consider working with your store's home office to arrange for backhaul and recycling at the main distribution center. Ask your suppliers about the possibility of backhauling to their distribution center. Many distribution centers recover a variety of recyclable material.
- Call ALPAR at 907-644-7968 to discuss logistics and strategies for backhauling bags to recyclers.

In dealing with markets, waste haulers or recycling centers, it is important to ask questions such as:

- What are the materials that are accepted?
- What if the material doesn't meet these guidelines?
- How will the material be transported and who pays the cost of transportation?
- In what form will materials be accepted? (Bags, Bales, what sizes?)
- For baled material, what type of strapping is acceptable?
- Is there a minimum shipment?
- What kind of long-term agreement is available?
- Is there support for marketing, promotion, signage, bins, storage trailers, etc?
- What are the pricing/cost details?

Examples of End Markets:

Trex Co.

AERT

Agri-Plas (Brooks, OR)\*

Nextlife, (Delray Beach, FL)\*

Eno Plastics( Camarilo, CA)\*

*\*Processes film for other manufacturers*

*\*\*Recycled Plastic Markets Database – [www.plasticresource.com](http://www.plasticresource.com)*

Recyclers/Brokers\*\*:

Smurfit Stone Recycling (Anchorage/Renton, WA)

Weyerhaeuser (Kent, WA)

CWRR (Renton, WA)

Boise Cascade/Re-Sourcing Assoc. (Lakewood, WA)

*NOTE: Determining the Type of Plastic: (from [www.plasticbagrecycling.org](http://www.plasticbagrecycling.org))*

Plastic bags are made out of "film", or thin flexible sheets of plastic. Plastic film is typically defined as any plastic less than 10 mm thick. The majority of plastic films are made from polyethylene resin and are readily recyclable if the material is clean, dry, and not pigmented black.

The resin coding system was originally intended for rigid plastic containers only. However, many manufacturers are now putting the code on plastic films too. Check out [www.plasticsresource.com](http://www.plasticsresource.com) for more information about plastics recycling, resin codes, and other types of plastic. If no resin code is printed on the plastic film or bag, the film's application may indicate the resin type since different resins are chosen for their unique performance. A primary characteristic of acceptable bags and film is the ability of the material to stretch at least a little.

**Mixing Plastic Film Types:**

Many buyers, or end users, accept a mixture of LDPE, LLDPE, HDPE, and MDPE. It is VERY important that you check your buyer's specifications. A big challenge in recycling is accumulating enough material to efficiently transport it to market. Combining compatible material is one way to improve efficiency.

## **2. Setting Up Bins**

Once you have found a recycler or end market for your materials, you need to determine the size, location and type of consumer collection bins. Bins should deter contamination: transparent bins or open frame racks capable of holding a transparent bag are the bins of choice for many retailers.

Avoid bins that resemble garbage cans. Bins should be placed in a visible area preferably near the front entrance. Regardless of the bin used, a clear plastic can liner should be utilized (for monitoring

material quality.) Avoid pigmented bags. Bagged films can be easily handled during transfer or baling activities. For maximum efficiency, choose liners that measure 38” by 65” approximately.

If you are working with a hauler who is picking up bagged film with other recyclables such as cardboard or baled plastic film, work with them to find how best to prepare the material for pick up.

Companies that sell recycling bins appropriate for bag recycling:

[www.clearstreamrecycler.com](http://www.clearstreamrecycler.com)

[www.linkabag.com](http://www.linkabag.com)

[www.windsorbarrel.com](http://www.windsorbarrel.com)

[www.diversi-plast.com](http://www.diversi-plast.com)

Process Displays: 763-512-5179

Trex and Rubbermaid offer bins that can be used for plastic bag recycling.

*Signage is critical for your program’s success.* Signage should be clearly visible on the bins and direct the customer to the bin and instruct on what bags to place in the bin. All plastic bag collection bins need to be labeled **“Recycle Your Plastic Shopping Bags Here”** or **“Recycle Plastic Shopping Bags Only”** and lined with clear plastic bags to ease collection.

Instructions should be provided on or near the bins or racks, such as:

- Recycle plastic shopping bags only;
- Empty your plastic bags by turning them inside out;
- No paper receipts;
- Stuff your empty plastic bags into one bag; and
- Deposit in dedicated bag recycling bin
- Thank you for recycling.



**Recycle Bin Sign:** This sign provides instructions on how to recycle plastic bags and film. The sign should be placed near the plastic bag recycling bin. The Progressive Bag Alliance has developed signage for your convenience. Please see additional signage at [www.progressivebagalliance.com](http://www.progressivebagalliance.com)



Other bin and store signage is available in print-ready versions from:

[www.plasticbagrecycling.org](http://www.plasticbagrecycling.org)

## Retail Bin Options

Retailers interested in implementing an at-store, take-back recycling program for plastic bags have a variety of options when it comes to deciding on the type of bin to use. Here is a quick glance at some of the different types of bins that are available currently.

### Link-A-Bag Systems



This type of collection bin involves a rack-style support bin with a clear polyethylene plastic bag. The company claims that the clear bag reinforces the fact that the receptacle is for recyclables only, thus reducing contamination. Packs of bags are available as well. Custom graphics space is also available on side panels.

Further information is available at: Link-a-Bag Systems, 1211 South Salina Street, Syracuse, NY 13202. Tel: 1-800-321-8154. Web site: [www.linkabag.com](http://www.linkabag.com).

### NextLife Recycling

NextLife Recycling offers a complete plastic bag collection and recycling program. The company sells its customers three different styles of collection bins. The first of these is a corrugated polypropylene bin and lid. This style of bin accommodates the large, inner plastic bag



“liner” into which the smaller plastic bags are put. The bins are available in different sizes and configurations. The second style of collection bin offered by the company is a solid plastic bin “frame” with a separate bin inside. This model is designed for permanent, long-time use and can be affixed in place with bolts. If used outside, however, it needs to be kept in a covered area because it has an open top. The third collection bin style is a “heavy-duty” bin capable of withstanding extreme outdoor weather.



Further information is available at: NextLife Recycling Alliance, 1801 S. Federal Highway, Suite 305, Delray Beach, Florida 33483. Tel: 1-877-NXTLIFE or 1-877-698-5433. Web site: [www.nextlife-recycling.com](http://www.nextlife-recycling.com).

### Diversi-Plast



The company offers a line of collection bins made of corrugated plastic. The material can be manufactured from recycled plastic and is available in a wide range of colours and designs. The corrugated plastic bins can also accommodate printing and can be produced with a non-skid coating on one side. The bins are said to be both durable and versatile, and extremely lightweight. The bins are made of corrugated plastic (plastic liners fused to plastic fluting). The material is said to be moisture proof and chemical resistant. The company can produce bins in a variety of styles and designs.

Further information can be found at: Diversi-Plast, 7425 Laurel Avenue, Golden Valley, MN 55426-1501. Tel: (763) 540-9700. Web site: [www.diversi-plast.com](http://www.diversi-plast.com).

### 3. Consolidation of Bags

Once you have designed a basic collection system, you now must consider how best to consolidate and transfer bags to a central location. A comprehensive plan to collect plastic film as part of your regular waste management activity can minimize labor and cost of recycling plastic bags and film.

Although little maintenance of the bins is required, a staff person should be assigned to monitor the bins and empty them when necessary. The staff person should look for contamination and remove if possible. A plastic bag could be pulled out to contain any contaminant, which would then be dropped in the nearest garbage bin. Emptying the bin simply involves pulling out the bag and tying it off. The “bag of bags” is carried back to the shipping and receiving part of the store. The retailer now has two options:

#### a. Central Distribution Facility

The preferred method of dealing with the large “bag of bags,” particularly for larger retailers, is to ship them to a central distribution facility. Bags from individual stores can be collected and loaded onto an outgoing truck heading back to such a facility. Bags are then compacted and /or baled at the distribution center along with other film such as stretch film, shrink or bundling film before being shipped to the recycler or processor.

#### b. No Central Distribution Facility

Retailers that do not have access to a central distribution facility will need to collect their bags have them picked up by a waste management firm that handles recycled material. The other option is to self-haul to the recycling facility. The material will be consolidated by the recycler with material from other stores, baled and then shipped to the end user or processor. You can call ALPAR for more information on methods for moving the material to the recycling facility; (907) 644-7968 or email [alpar@gci.net](mailto:alpar@gci.net).

*Note: Your bag manufacturer/supplier may also be able to provide sources to handle this material.*

### 4. Baling

If plastic volume exceeds 1 ton per month, stores should consider using dedicated balers for plastic, cardboard balers or an existing trash compactor to consolidate “bags of bags” for efficient storage and lower cost transport. Baling is called for when selling to an end market but recyclers or waste haulers do not require baling to accept the material. Businesses with large volumes of shrink-wrap or pallet wrap may see significant cost savings to baling film and taking to a recycler. For example, Pepsi Cola of Anchorage saves over \$30,000 annually in waste costs by baling their pallet wrap and delivering to the recycling center.

### 5. Costs & Benefits:

If your location already has a recycling program, many of the costs of plastic bag recycling can be just an incremental cost of adding to an existing program. Start up costs may include:

- The purchase of new collection bins
- signage; and
- liner bags.

In calculating the annual cost of recovering plastic bags, both the incremental costs and the start up costs should be spread over a period of time. For example, the cost of containers can be spread over their useful life.

If you are baling plastic in industry size bales, you may be able to sell your plastic bags directly to the market and recoup some of your costs. More likely, though, individual stores will not be able to sell the recycled bags due to the need for additional processing. However, if plastic bag recovery is couple with plastic shrink-wrap or cardboard recovery, stores may recoup costs through lower waste hauling and landfill fees.

More and more consumers are focused on being more environmentally mindful and they want to shop at businesses that help them do that. Your business will gain additional customer goodwill by providing convenient recycling and reuse alternatives.

By joining other retailers who are voluntarily and proactively addressing the potential problems of disposable plastic bags you send a message to legislators that there are better solutions than imposing fees or bans.

## **6. Consumer Education**

When appropriate, educate shoppers that you provide plastic bag recycling at your store. In-store posters, notation on bags, and information at the check-out counter and in your advertising will inform the public and show your commitment to product stewardship.

Download a variety of print-ready bag logos, signage, buttons, and posters at:

<http://www.progressivebagalliance.com/at-store-toolkit.html>

<http://www.plasticbagrecycling.org/02.0/s02.43.php>

Another important component in promoting the program is to ensure that the bins are located in a highly visible area in the store and are accompanied with a clear set of instructions. Retailers are encouraged to keep their customers informed about the progress of the program. This can be done through signage or flyers and can be as simple as stating that a certain quantity of bags have been recycled.

Another great way to promote the program is to have a product on display that actually uses recycled plastic shopping bags. A bench or waste receptacle made from recycled plastic lumber is a good idea and may even be available from your local hardware store. Showcasing this type of product will provide shoppers with a tangible product that they can see is made from recycled plastic shopping bags and will encourage them to keep recycling.

## II. Encouraging Reuse and Conservation

### 1. Using Fewer Bags:

Training employees on the proper use of bags is an important component of your reuse and conservation effort. Grocers and other retailers should continue to improve their efforts to educate employees about using only the number of bags necessary to do the job as well as encouraging shoppers to reuse their disposable bags or reusable bags.

Educating employees not to double-bag groceries and to increase the number of items in each bag will result in fewer bags being used. Store purchases come in a wide range of shapes, sizes and weights. Some items should never be bagged and other products come with ready to carry packaging that reduces the need for a bag. Properly filled, bags can carry more items without breaking. Shoppers and baggers can work together to properly pack bags and reduce usage.

#### 10 Proper Bagging Tips:

1. Do you need a bag?
2. Don't bag, large bulky items
3. Eliminate double bagging
4. Build a sturdy base
5. Secure "crushable" items
6. Pack like items together
7. Isolate certain items
8. Fill space with small items
9. Fill out the bag properly
10. Use the right size bag

### 2. Offering Shoppers Reusable Bags:

Many retailers and businesses of all kinds are now offering reusable shopping bags for sale or promotion. While some retailers are selling the higher priced cotton canvas bags, many are opting for adding a lightweight yet sturdy polypropylene bag that is cloth-like, water-repellent, tear-resistant and has a lower price point. Store logos can also be imprinted on the bags and is another promotional tool for your disposable bag conservation effort.

Here are just a few examples of reusable shopping bags:

Crestline: [www.crestline.com](http://www.crestline.com)

Bags on the Run: [www.bagsontherun.com](http://www.bagsontherun.com)

Reuse this Bag: [www.reusethisbag.com](http://www.reusethisbag.com)

### 3. Offering rebates for reusing disposables and reusable bags

A great way to encourage consumers who opt to reuse their own bags is to provide a rebate on each personal bag used. Some retailers are now offering from 1 to 5 cents per bag for shoppers who bring in their own disposable or reusable bags. Regularly educating employees on providing this rebate will reduce time needed for this transaction. And, promoting this service to your customers will garner additional customer satisfaction and good will.