



## Do Reusable Bags Make You Sick? Ummm...

By: [Monica Bobadilla](#) - February 26, 2013

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In March we introduced our readers to attorney Stephen Joseph, or "The Bag Man," who tendentiously claims that plastic bags are wrongly blamed for environment destruction (ever seen the doc "Bag It"?). Andy Keller, a founding member of the Reusable Bag Association, told our Nick Welsh that what Joseph is protecting is a failing and outdated industry that refuses to embrace change.

But does new research on the dangers of reusable grocery bags bolster the Bag Man's case? Jonathan Klick and Joshua D. Wright of the University of Pennsylvania Law School find that foodborne illnesses "spiked" in San Francisco County when its limitations on plastic bags went into effect. Timothy Taylor of Macalester College explains at his [Conversable Economist](#) blog:

"The problem is that almost no one ever washes their reusable grocery bags. Reusable grocery bags often carry raw meat, un-separated from other foods, and are often stored for convenience in the trunk of cars that sit outside in the sun. In short, reusable grocery bags can be a friendly breeding environment for E. coli bacteria, which can cause severe illness and even death."

A discomfoting finding, for sure, although that "raw meat" comes encased in plastic wrap and Styrofoam in these parts. But it's a finding that might be cause for concern for the people in the more than 30 states with either in-effect or proposed plastic bag bans, including a handful of California cities and counties facing legal challenges brought by Joseph's [Save the Plastic Bag Coalition](#).

It is worth noting, however, that the study was funded by a source that, like Joseph's coalition, has an explicitly ideological and/or financial motivation: the Julian Simon Fellowship, named for the uber-libertarian Cato Institute scholar and promoter of free-market environmentalist.

The Washington Post's Brad Plumer critiqued the study, pointing out that the Klick and Wright didn't demonstrate a link between the bag ban and illnesses to show that the same people who are using reusable bags are the ones getting sick. Additionally, the emergency room data presented in the study could be incomplete. Looking at an alternative measure, there was no increase in E. coli at all. (San Francisco's Department of Public Health also questioned the methodology while acknowledging the paper's premise is "plausible.")

The implementation of four new plastic bag bans this March in Austin, Texas; Portland, Oregon; Issaquah, Washington; and Mamaroneck, New York should pave the way for further study of the risks posed by re-useable bags and the banning of plastic bags. For now, we can feel a little less guilt—or not—about forgetting our shopping totes at home.