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A staple under siege: Plastic bag manufacturers battle taxes and bans

By [Michael S. Rosenwald](#), Published: April 12

This is where your Wal-Mart bag's life begins: in Elkridge, not far from Baltimore-Washington International Marshall Airport, at a hulking factory the size of three football fields. Millions of bags with blue Wal-mart logos or red Target bull's-eyes spin through Advance Polybag's plant. The operation runs nonstop, every day, even Christmas.

For the factory's owners and its 140 employees, producing a useful staple of everyday life represents one version of the American dream. But to environmentalists and some politicians, the millions of bags produced by the plant every day are a plague upon the Earth, fouling rivers, oceans and forests.

Plastic bags have been banned in some parts of the country and taxed in others, including [the District](#) and [Montgomery County](#). Just last month, Maryland lawmakers considered imposing the country's first statewide bag tax, of 5 cents. The legislation didn't make it to the floor of the House of Delegates, but proponents promise to push the measure again next year.

"This is coming, one way or another," said Dereck E. Davis (D-Prince George's), chairman of the powerful House Economic Matters Committee, where a watered-down version of the bill died after passing in the environmental committee. "The whole idea of free bags is going by the wayside. It's not a matter of if, but when."

Such tough talk has the plastic bag industry girded for a long battle against taxes and bans — not just in Maryland but around the country, where dozens of measures are under consideration. The industry's fear, experts say, is that even though plastic bags account for only \$9.8 billion of the \$374 billion plastics business, targeting bags could be a starting point for increased regulatory scrutiny against other plastic products, including bottles.

Along with industry trade groups, executives from Advance Polybag and Hilex Poly, another top bag maker, are on the offensive, hiring public relations firms and lobbyists, writing op-eds, backing social media campaigns with titles such as [BagTheBan](#). They complain their views aren't given a fair hearing by lawmakers and regulators, who often leave their testimony to the very end of hearings.

"Give us a fair debate," said Bill Ebeck, Advance Polybag's director of sales, in an interview at the Elkridge plant attended by a representative from Edelman, the New York public relations firm that also represents Wal-Mart. "We can present the truths from the facts, as opposed to the opinions."

Ebeck recently published an [op-ed](#) calling plastic bags "scapegoats," declaring bags aren't a major

environmental problem and noting that “for the hardest hit families, every nickel counts.”

Once a wonder

Plastic bags weren’t always an object of derision. They were patented in 1962 by a Swedish engineer named Sten Thulin, who “devised an ingenious system of folds and welds that made it possible to transform a flimsy tube of polyethylene film into a strong, sturdy bag,” journalist Susan Freinkel wrote in her 2011 book, [“Plastic: A Toxic Love Story.”](#)

Back then, the bag was viewed with something like wonder.

“Today the bag is so maligned that we forget what an engineering marvel it is: a waterproof, durable, featherweight packet capable of holding more than a thousand times its weight,” Freinkel wrote.

But it wasn’t an immediate hit. Shoppers “didn’t like the way a checkout clerk often licked his fingers to pull a plastic bag free from the rack, or the fact that the bags wouldn’t stand up,” Freinkel wrote.

After companies showed consumers that a flat-bottom bag wasn’t always needed, plastic bags caught on. Today companies such as Advance Polybag, which is based near Houston, produce millions a day in factories around the United States. By some estimates, consumers use more than a trillion plastic bags around the world every year. Advance Polybag generates about \$260 million a year in sales, according to [Plastics News](#).

The problem, according to environmentalists, is that the bags are so light and so bountiful that they frequently fly away from custody, clogging streams and waterways, getting stuck in trees, polluting oceans. That’s one side of the argument, which is pushed not just by environmentalists but also the paper bag industry. In some anti-bag legislation, paper bags have been included with plastics, making paper bag manufacturers angry and defensive.

“The paper bag has been unfairly lumped into the single-use bag category,” said Christopher Klein, environmental manager for Kentucky-based Duro Bag, the country’s largest paper bag maker, whose customers include Macy’s and Dunkin’ Donuts. “Paper bags are much more sustainable and are the better option for the environment.”

The plastic industry, not surprisingly, disagrees. Its side of the argument goes like this: Plastic bags are recyclable, bags are often used more than once, they generate less waste than paper, regulatory action increases costs for lower-income consumers, environmental pollution is exaggerated by plastic bag-haters, and reusable bags are made in China, and lastly, they often become a breeding ground for germs.

The facts, according to the Environmental Protection Agency: “In 2010, the category of plastics which includes bags, sacks, and wraps was recycled at almost [12 percent](#)” and plastic bags, sacks and wraps comprise [less than 1 percent](#) of the municipal solid waste stream. Plastic bags represented more than 20 percent of trash in the Anacostia River, according to a 2008 [study](#) prepared by the Anacostia Watershed Society, a nonprofit environmental group.

SPI, the plastics industry trade group, helps executives push their arguments to politicians around the country through the [American Progressive Bag Alliance](#), a collection of top bag producers. The industry is also active on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. “I care about the amount of plastic litter in our environment,” an online [petition](#) says, “but I don’t think banning or taxing plastic grocery bags would be the right decision for my community.”

On BagTheBan's Facebook page the other day, a post said, "Do you know what's lurking inside of your reusable bags? SHARE to inform your friends of what may be lurking in their bags as well!" The post linked to a BagTheBan video on YouTube with gloomy music playing in the background as a narrator details studies showing that reusable grocery bags collect dangerous bacteria such as E.coli.

That research has been questioned by environmentalists: "There was no evidence that reusable bags contain anything close to dangerous levels of bacteria, or that the E.coli strains found were in fact dangerous," the group Californians Against Waste [wrote](#) about a prominent study.

A source of jobs

The industry has one other argument: jobs. SPI says 30,000 people work in the plastic bag industry. About 150 of them work at Advance Polybag's Elkrige plant. Though the industry makes the jobs argument often, including recently in Annapolis to the House Economic Matters committee, the chairman of the committee said the industry's financial defense didn't carry much weight.

"I think it's par for the course," said Davis, who voted in favor of the tax legislation. "Anytime we do this sort of thing, the industry trade associations will paint a gloom and doom picture." Of bag executives and the trade groups, Davis said, "I don't think they had an influence at all." Rather, he thinks the committee was concerned about adding another tax this session after passing other revenue measures, including a gas tax increase.

One place the jobs message has resonated: inside Advance Polybag's plants. The company's employees, many of them refugees from Burma's military dictatorship, say they have been worried — not just about losing precious overtime or even their jobs, but about paying a tax on their cash-tight trips to the grocery or drug store.

"It's going to be difficult for my family," predicted Se Thlie, a 28-year-old Burmese refugee, speaking through an interpreter. "It's going to be less hours, or I might lose my job."

Thlie works as a quality control worker at the behemoth facility not far from I-95. Her days are long and noisy. A plastic bag might eventually float quietly away in the wind, landing who knows where, but a bag's birth — as tiny polyethylene pellets melted and then stretched in one of more than two dozen hulking extruders — is so loud that workers stick plugs in their ears.

Ebeck said Advance Polybag would rather spend money on expanding operations than battling legislators.

"When you are under attack, you spend money fighting legislation and we could be creating jobs," he said. Asked whether a 5-cent statewide tax could affect employment levels, Ebeck replied, "When you keep attacking an industry, sooner or later it's gonna affect employment."

Would the firm move the plant? "I couldn't answer that," he said.

Sen. Jamie B. Raskin (D-Montgomery), a co-sponsor of the bag tax legislation, said bag producers should diversify their products to get along in a world he sees moving away from plastic bags. "Nobody is out to