

One year after plastic bag ban, how is China doing?

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Standing beside a cashier's counter, with both hands full with goods she bought in Carrefour, Zhao Shaojuan realized that she forgot to bring a bag with her.

Just a year before, all shopping malls, supermarkets and open markets in Beijing provided free plastic bags. The 66-year-old Zhao still finds it hard to adopt to taking a bag when shopping.

"But I will try to bring a bag next time," said the retired high school teacher.

Chen Gang, a 30-year-old office worker, said that he is used to taking a bag when he goes to supermarkets.

Almost a year ago, on June 1, 2008, China banned supermarkets, shops and open markets from supplying free plastic bags to customers, in a drive to protect environment and cut waste.

So what has happened in the past year?

On Monday afternoon, a Xinhua report watched 100 customers and found 24 bought plastic bags in a Wal-Mart in southern Beijing.

Statistics from the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) showed that the 106 outlets of Wal-Mart China had reduced plastic bag usage by 80 percent in the past year.

The number of plastic bags used in supermarkets was lowered by 40 billion, or 66 percent, said the NDRC.

Xie Zhenhua, NDRC deputy director, gave a more vivid example: all the plastic bags saved in one year equal 1.6 million tonnes of petroleum.

He explained that plastic bags take about 200 years to decompose and they greatly contaminate soil and water sources. If they end up in rivers and the sea, they may lead to the deaths of fish, animals and plants.

However, shopkeepers in open markets and commune groceries still provide free plastic bags, for fear that otherwise, no customer will patronize their business.

For Zhan Nan, a cashier in Wal-Mart, it is easy to live without plastic bags.

"People may feel inconvenient at first, but they will become easy without plastic bags, it's just a problem of habit."

Supermarkets in Beijing including Carrefour and Wal-Mart have encouraged customers to use reusable shopping bags, which hang above every cashier's counter.

The plastic bag ban is only a part of the government drive for environment protection, which has included developing clean energy, and lowering carbon emissions.

China has allocated 21 million yuan (about 3.1 million U.S. dollars), about 5.25 percent of its four-trillion economic stimulus package, into energy saving and ecological construction.

The State Administration of Industry and Commerce issued a regulation that any shopkeeper who provides free plastic bags to customers will receive a 10,000 yuan fine. However, only very few people receive fine in Beijing.

It's hard work to persuade 1.3 billion people to give up plastic bags, said Shi Pengxiang, a project manager of Greenpeace China.

"But more important, we have made a start," said Shi.

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