

Bag levy plans are in chaos as retailers object to exemptions

Ben Webster Environment Editor

Plans to impose a 5p charge on plastic bags but allow paper bags to be given away could do more harm than good to the environment, according to retailers.

Ministers are under pressure to scrap proposed exemptions to the charge and apply it to all bags, including those made of paper or biodegradable plastic.

The Government has said that it plans to tell larger retailers in England to impose a 5p charge for single-use plastic bags from October next year.

Ministers acted after voluntary schemes, such as giving customers "loyalty points" for reusing bags, failed to stem the rise in single-use bags. Just over seven billion thin plastic bags were handed out in England in 2012, up 4.4 per cent on the previous year.

The number of bags distributed in Wales fell by 76 per cent over the same period after it introduced a 5p charge on all bags from all shops.

Conservative ministers agreed to allow Nick Clegg, the Deputy Prime Minister, to announce a similar charge in England only after securing various exemptions. However, the British Retail Consortium, which represents major retailers, has produced evidence showing that exempting paper bags from the charge could increase overall emissions from producing bags.

Paper bags require significantly more energy to manufacture and transport than thin plastic bags, meaning that they have at least three times the carbon footprint of thin plastic bags.

The BRC said that paper bags were just as likely to become litter and it was

Carbon footprint of bag compared with thin plastic bag (or how many times it has to be used to have less environmental impact than the plastic carrier)

Paper bag



3x

Low-cost reusable carrier bag



4x

Non-woven polypropylene bag*



11x

Cotton bag



131x

*heavy, more durable reusable carrier bag, often with stiffening inserts

Source: Environment Agency, February 2011

concerned that exempting them would send a mixed message to consumers and distract from the overall aim of encouraging people to reuse bags.

In a submission to the Commons Environmental Audit Committee inquiry into plastic bags, the BRC said: "The proposed charge should apply to all single-use carrier bags regardless of material type. [This] would ensure a consistent approach across the UK nations and would send a clear message to shoppers that there will be a minimum charge for single-use bags and that they should bring reusable bags with them."

It also rejected the proposed exemption for biodegradable bags because they cannot be recycled with ordinary plastic bags.

Axion, a recycling company, told the committee that encouraging retailers to give away biodegradable bags could have "disastrous impacts upon the quality and usability" of recycled plastic.

The Break the Bag Habit coalition,

which includes Keep Britain Tidy, the Campaign to Protect Rural England, the Marine Conservation Society and Surfers Against Sewage, said the charge should include all single-use bags.

A spokeswoman for the Break the Bag coalition said: "Biodegradable plastic bags and paper bags still end up as litter on our streets, in our parks and beaches and, in the case of biodegradable plastic bags, in our marine environment where they can do significant harm to marine life.

"We urge the Government to follow the example of Wales and introduce a charge on all single-use bags."

A spokeswoman for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs said: "Plastic bags are a blight on our towns and countryside. Paper bags are less of a problem as they are used on a much smaller scale and break down naturally in the environment. Biodegradable bags will only be exempt from a charge if they are genuinely biodegradable. No such carrier bag exists."