

What is a Reusable Bag?

Surprisingly, there are a lot of ways to define a reusable bag. Some town policies say that it must be able to be reused at least 75 times and withstand repeated washing; others list the types of material, and many define the *thickness* of the bag.

Which brings up the topic of Mils. A Mil is a unit of measurement used to measure the thickness of film plastics in thousandths of an inch: 1 Mil=1/1000 inch. For reference, a thin plastic shopping bag is about .5 Mil, a bread bag is about 1.5 Mils and a thick, retail plastic shopping bag, like you'd get at clothing or shoe store, is about 2 Mils.

Most of the plastic bag bans and fee programs attempt to eliminate the thinnest plastic shopping bags. But, if a reusable bag is defined as a 2.25 Mil bag and greater, the result could be a move away from *thin* plastic bags to *thick* plastic bags. These bags may be stronger, but they are still not thick enough to withstand repeated trips to the grocery store—and more often than not are still discarded after a single use.

The City of Watsonville, CA, for instance, initially defined a reusable bag as being at least 2.25 Mils. But many stores simply began giving away free 2.25 Mil bags instead of their thinner counterparts. This meant MORE plastic was being used instead of less. The City had to remedy the issue by changing the thickness standard for a reusable bag to 4 Mils.

While many stores will be law-abiding and support the intention of the local ordinance, it is wiser to define reusable, non-woven plastic bag as being 4 Mils or greater. And, no matter what standard is chosen, it is important for the community and retailers to educate people about the importance of reusing theirs. It is also important that retailers charge enough for a *reusable* bag so people won't just casually toss them out.