

Behavioural Change Crucial to Reduction in Plastic Bag Wastage

Singapore Environment Council releases findings after detailed research into plastic bag issue in Singapore

Singapore, 30 September 2013 – In 2011 alone, consumers in Singapore used approximately 3 billion plastic bags. The alarming figure has prompted concerned members of the public to write to environmental organisations, newspapers and online forums calling for a ban or a tax to be levied on plastic bags. A few have also called on the government to enforce this through legislation. However, the other end of the spectrum also sees consumers who view the distribution of free plastic bags a convenience that they are not willing to give up.

The Singapore Environment Council (SEC) released a position paper today highlighting the findings of consumer behaviour and attitudes towards plastic bags and reusable bags and a broad range of recommendations to mitigate the wasteful use of plastic bags in Singapore.

“The findings in this paper have shown that the usage of plastic bags in Singapore is a complex and multi-faceted issue for which there is no simple solution. Economic considerations have to be balanced with environmental and commercial and even personal interests. The recommendations shared in this position paper form the catalyst for definitive action by individuals, retailers and the government. It is the starting point for a national discourse on changing consumer behaviour regarding the use of plastic bags,” said Mr Jose Raymond, Executive Director of the SEC.

Added Mr Raymond: “From consumers to retailers, each of us has a crucial role to play in ensuring a successful switch of mindset. A paradigm shift comes not from one party alone, but from a concerted effort of the people, public and private sectors. We believe this proposal will bear fruit when Singaporeans see the long-term benefits it brings to generations down the road.”

Led by Principal Project Researcher, Ms Vaidehi Hemant Shah, a set of survey questions was designed to investigate how households in Singapore obtain and reuse plastic bags. The survey targeted 2,500 participants who were Singaporeans or Permanent Residents, aged 15 years and above and living in various types of households.

Apart from working with the Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources and the National Environment Agency, the SEC conducted focus group discussions involving

members of the public and senior management representatives from Singapore's major retailers. In addition, five in-depth interviews were conducted with stakeholders from the academic, environmental and manufacturing sectors, as well as the general public.

"The aim was to reach out to as diverse a group as possible so that the results would be representative of what was the ground sentiment, and also to understand the problems from as many angles as possible," said Ms Shah. Approximately 33% of the 2,500 respondents polled indicated that they waste all or some of the plastic bags given out for free at supermarkets. The statistic of 8.5% of the respondents who reported recycling plastic bags showed a usage pattern where plastic bags are not being reused.

In addition, the survey revealed the foremost reason for not using reusable bags is the free availability of the plastic bags in supermarkets. Other commonly cited reasons were unplanned shopping trips and forgetting to bring usable bags.

Although 90% of the 2,500 respondents indicated that the plastic bags were reused to dispose of general waste, some households are storing quantities of plastic bags in excess of what they need for waste disposal. 8.5% would recycle the bags while 6.3% of participants highlighted that they would throw away the bags without reusing them.

The findings reinforced the need for greater awareness among consumers, and a relook at the waste collection infrastructure while still addressing public hygiene concerns. One participant mentioned the excessive use of plastic bags at bakeries, which saw pastries individually wrapped with plastic sheets, and found to have little or no use thereafter. This also highlighted the need to look at the potential reusability of smaller plastic bags.

The position paper made several recommendations in light of the findings.

A list of the recommendations is as follows:

- A nationwide "Bring Your Own Bag Everyday" programme should be initiated by the government, in collaboration with 3P stakeholders. It should be compulsory for all commercial establishments to participate in this programme.
- Initiatives to curb plastic bag wastage (e.g. charging, awareness initiatives, etc.) should focus more strongly on eliminating the use of bags with lower potential for secondary use, such as food bags, and smaller plastic bags given out at convenience stores and hawker stalls.
- Vendors at F&B outlets (e.g. hawker stalls, coffee shops and food courts) should be encouraged to offer customers a rebate for rejecting small-sized bags and disposable plates, cups and utensils in favour of their own reusable items.
- Rethink current waste management infrastructure especially the convenience of rubbish chutes in every household.

- Retailers should stand firm in their resolve to have cashiers ask if customers really need plastic bags, and collect the extra charge per plastic bag on weekends as part of the “Bring Your Own Bag Everyday” campaign, despite potential customer complaints.
- Retailers should be transparent about the number of plastic bags used per year, and the cost incurred by procuring these plastic bags.
- More financial and programme support needs to be extended to ground-up initiatives targeted at reducing plastic bag wastage in Singapore.
- In order to overcome the “lack of mindfulness” barrier wherein consumers may forget to bring reusable bags on shopping trips, or not have reusable bags with them when making unplanned purchases, retailers can place bins containing second-hand reusable bags near cashier counters.
- To ensure that environmental education about this issue begins from a young age, all schoolchildren in Singapore can be equipped with a “no-waste toolkit”.
- The Bring Your Own Bag Everyday campaign should kick off with an immediate education and awareness campaign, followed by the mandatory charge on weekends six months after the campaign is formally launched

“All the recommendations put forth in this position paper would require a concerted effort from stakeholders such as the government, retailers, academic organisations, environment specialists and the public,” added Mr Raymond.

The SEC welcomes opportunities for collaboration with all stakeholders to reduce plastic bag wastage in Singapore, and also plans to embark on an outreach and education campaign in 2014.

The full release of the position paper can be found on SEC’s website at [http://www.sec.org.sg/publication/SEC Position Paper on Reducing Plastic Bag Wastage in Singapore.pdf](http://www.sec.org.sg/publication/SEC_Position_Paper_on_Reducing_Plastic_Bag_Wastage_in_Singapore.pdf).

**** END OF MEDIA RELEASE****

NOTES TO THE EDITOR



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Established in 1995, the Singapore Environment Council (SEC) is an independently managed, non-government organisation that nurtures, facilitates and co-ordinates environmental causes in Singapore. SEC's work is founded on three pillars of action – Firstly, partnership with the people, private and public sectors of Singaporean society, to nurture a culture aligned with sustainable development concepts. Secondly, SEC rewards environmental excellence through awards schemes and product endorsement programmes, such as the Singapore Green Labelling Scheme. Thirdly, the SEC collaborates with partners to develop and implement training and learning programmes to build competencies in environmental sustainability within companies, thus keeping our business leaders ahead of the curve. Visit our website at www.sec.org.sg.

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