

Position Statement on degradable and biodegradable/ compostable plastic bags

June 2020

**Boomerang Alliance does not support the use of degradable or biodegradable/
compostable plastic carry or barrier bags as a replacement for conventional plastic
bags. The better option is a genuinely reusable bag, capable of being used on
multiple occasions.**

Plastic bags (including from so-called degradable or biodegradable/ compostable plastic), pose one of the greatest impacts to the marine environment and wildlife. They escape easily and float in air and water, travelling long distances. They are responsible for many wildlife ingestion and entanglement issues. They break up into smaller and smaller pieces of microplastic, having devastating impacts on the environment and wildlife. As well, littered plastic bags are unsightly, block waterways and streams, can clog up infrastructure, and are difficult and costly to clean up.

Most states in Australia have now banned lightweight plastic carry bags. Replacement of these with degradable and biodegradable/compostable bags is not a solution as all littered plastic bags still represent a problem. Increasingly, government bans are including a specific ban on degradable, biodegradable/ compostable plastic bags (e.g., Qld, Vic, NZ).

The different types of degradable/biodegradable bags

Degradable (or landfill biodegradable or oxo-biodegradable/degradable) bags are made from conventional fossil-fuel based plastic with an additive which makes it simply break into smaller pieces more quickly. This makes it resemble food for wildlife even more than standard plastic bags, and contributes to the worldwide microplastic problem. They are not compostable and not suited to recycling as the additive compromises the integrity of the recycled product.

Biodegradable/compostable plastic bags are often made from plant-based products like cornstarch, which, under the right conditions, are able to break down. Certified compostable bags are tested to break down in specific timeframes under specific conditions, leaving no toxic residues. However, if these bags are discarded inappropriately as litter or in landfill, they are unlikely to meet the specific conditions they require in order to break down effectively. They decompose slowly in the marine environment, and by the time they do, they have already done the damage. They are a large risk for entanglement and ingestion issues for wildlife. Additionally, because they are 'biodegradable' they tend to be littered more as consumers think that they are safe to discard. Biodegradable/compostable bags are also not suited to recycling.

Boomerang Alliance believes that all plastic carry bags (lightweight and thick) and barrier bags (bags without handles often used to separate fruit and vegetables) should be banned. This includes plastic degradable and biodegradable/ compostable bags. There are better alternative options available. Bags are one of the easiest items to replace with reusable alternatives, and we do not believe that switching from one type of plastic bag to another creates any change or benefit to our environment.