



PACIFIC COAST  
FARMERS' MARKET  
ASSOCIATION

## DEAR DEB – NOVEMBER 2023



Dear Deb: We're trying to reduce plastic waste, so why are plastic bags still being used at the farmers' market? David R. Pleasanton

David: While single-use plastic bags seem to be everywhere, they do harm our environment. They're also a growing problem for communities' waste management and recycling facility capabilities.

California recently passed a statewide ban on single-use, handled plastic bags, but farmers' markets, restaurants, and some retail stores are often exempt. In addition to California laws, each county and city may have its own plastic bag bans and restrictions.

Allen Moy, Executive Director of PCFMA, says, "We often hear from customers who bring their own bags to the farmers market that they would prefer farmers' markets no longer distribute plastic bags. We share their commitment to moving our society to one that is more environmentally sustainable, but we need to balance that against the need to keep farmers' markets economically sustainable. If farmers could no longer provide bags to their customers, they would lose significant sales to those who forgot their bags or who perhaps happened upon a farmers' market that they hadn't known about before. Those sales that customers take home in plastic bags help to keep the farmers showing up and the market operating for the whole community."

Some people have asked why farmers' markets can't just provide compostable or paper bags to their customers. The answer is simple: cost. PCFMA is a non-profit organization and doesn't have the budget to provide free bags to everyone. Because the margins on fresh produce are small, many farmers say they can't afford to absorb the cost of these types of bags.

We must also note that a farmers' market has less of a carbon footprint than grocery stores because the produce comes from local farmers who do not have to travel as far to get their products to market. This direct-to-market sales model is far less harmful to the environment overall.

A farmer's cost of doing business is higher than ever with prices rising for seed, labor, insurance, and more. Single-use plastic bags are the least expensive to use, though some of our farmers do use paper bags rather than plastic. They don't have the luxury of buying in bulk to lower costs or have a larger margin for profit. Each increase in the cost of sales is harder for them to absorb.

What can you do if you're concerned about using single-use plastic bags at the farmers market? Here are a few tips:

- Bring your own reusable bags. This is the best way to reduce your impact on the environment.
- Forego the plastic bag roll and ask the farmer if you can put your produce directly on the scale.
- Ask your farmer to put all of your produce in one bag at the end.
- Support farmers who are working to reduce their use of plastic bags.

If you are concerned about picking up your produce at each vendor and using a bag for each product, consider foregoing the single-use bags putting your products right on the scale, and then adding to your reusable shopping bag. We also suggest you speak with your local government representative to discuss the problem.

We will continue to enforce the state ban on handled plastic shopping bags as we work with the farmers, the state, and the counties to abide by any new plastic bag use regulations.

Remember, farmers' markets are an important part of our communities. By supporting them and making small changes to your shopping habits, you can help to protect our environment.

TAGS