

# Study not worth its salt: Saxby

Plastics industry finds cloth bags dirty, according to small sample

BY ERIN HANDY

*Times Staff*

A study by the plastics industry that found 64 per cent of the tested cloth bags contaminated isn't holding much water with Tracey Saxby.

The brains behind a campaign to reduced plastic bag use in Rossland said the Toronto study of 24 reusable cloth grocery bags was too small to provide any meaning and won't deter her from her efforts.

"The plastics industry has limitless resources. . . I'm not surprised; they've been doing this since day one," she said. "(The study is) a sign that we're doing the right thing."

Sixty-four per cent of the randomly chosen bags for the study were found to be contaminated with some

level of bacteria, 40 per cent with yeast or mould, and some turned up the presence of fecal intestinal bacteria. The study concluded that moist, folded cloth bags are a prime breeding ground for bacteria.

Saxby said that washing the bags and not using them to transport pets or dirty gym clothes is just expected good hygiene. "Consumers should use their common sense."

Saxby noted that while many Rosslanders were washing the bags her organization produced in 2008, the 2009 polyester version was specially chosen to hold up better in the rinse and spin cycles.

"That's why we made the switch."

In the first year of its reusable bags campaign in Rossland, Greener Footprints noted a 75 per cent decrease in plastic bag use.

Saxby also raised concerns about the study itself, noting that it looked at

only 24 bags, and didn't take into account the bacteria that may have been on shopping carts and baskets, or transferred from cashiers' hands.

The Interior Health Authority is recommending sensible hygiene measures rather than a wholesale return to plastic bag use.

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DR. NELSON AMES

"From a global perspective, Interior Health is committed to green initiatives and reducing our ecological footprint, so we do support reusable containers," said retiring Kootenay medical health officer, Dr. Nelson Ames.

"From a public health perspective, any container that is reusable - whether

cloth bags or plastic bags, which people also reuse - should be kept clean, just like we should be cleaning our cutting boards and countertops after preparing food on them. Washing reusable bags and drying them thoroughly is a good idea."

The Ontario study was funded by the Environment and Plastics Industry Council, and evaluated by Dr. Richard Summerhill, former chief of medical mycology at Ontario's health ministry, who noted that health risks to consumers included food poisoning, bacterial boils, asthma attacks and ear infections.

The study has been sent to the federal sub-committee on food safety, and its backers are requesting a national requirement that supermarket meats be wrapped in plastic before leaving stores.

Greener Footprints is working on a reusable product to replace plastic produce bags in local stores.