

# Don't let the plastics industry exploit coronavirus to roll back progress

September 7 2020, by Arissa Lahr

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Inside a package-free grocery store. Credit: Arissa Lahr

Just days before New York City's shelter in place order took effect, I

peddled nervously to my shift at [Precycle](#), a package-free grocery store in Brooklyn. My hands gripped tight to the handlebars of my bike. With the potential threat of virus exposure and the frenzied atmosphere stemming from a rush on grocery stores, I opened the shop that morning with hesitation. But in actuality, I had little time to overanalyze my fears. Word of an imminent lockdown had already spread, and customers flooded the shop. By the end of my shift, the shelves and fridges were sparse.

Back in 2018, Precycle opened its doors with a unique mission: to create a grocery store that would eliminate the need for single-use disposable packaging. I joined in the summer of 2019 and quickly learned that this type of operation required a certain level of thoughtfulness. Everything we order is calculated to arrive with bare-minimum packaging. Whatever material we do receive, mostly cardboard, is recycled, and any leftover materials are sent to [TerraCycle](#), a company that specializes in finding new uses for traditionally 'hard-to-recycle' materials.

Because of these measures, Precycle generates less than a couple of small trash bags a year. Customers arrive with the reusable containers of their choice; bags, jars, whatever works. At the shop they fill up on [local produce](#), bulk bin items, oils, teas, spices, pastas, flours and more. In response to a world drowning in harmful and unnecessary waste, the concept proves that reuse and refill systems are viable alternatives.

But alongside the lockdown came fears that reusables could contribute to the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Some argued, that if the virus were to stick on reusable material, the subsequent handling could potentially cause spreading among store employees and other customers. Out of genuine concern for frontline workers and the general public, these fears were not entirely out of line. Seemingly overnight, we shut down our in-store operations and transitioned to online orders for curbside contactless pick up, using the less-than-ideal option of recyclable paper bags.

Shops across the country quickly responded by banning the use of [reusable bags](#). Coffee shops prohibited customers from bringing in or "reusing" their own mugs. Municipal [plastic bag bans](#) were immediately halted. It felt like the death knell of reusables.

But what appeared to be a logical pushback against reusables out of an "abundance of caution" was in more ways an insidious attempt by the plastics and [fossil fuel industry](#) to exploit the pandemic and push their own single-use plastic agenda. At the end of March, Greenpeace published a [research brief](#) that uncovered an extensive PR campaign from the plastics industry. It tracked numerous op-eds by think tanks with ties to the industry, which made repeated claims about the dangers of reusables. The articles supported by corporate-backed "studies," were specifically targeted to newspapers in municipalities where bag bans were soon to take effect.

Despite these reported claims against reusables, there are no documented cases linking reusables to the spread of COVID-19. On the contrary, early studies have indicated that the virus is actually more likely to live longer on plastic surfaces. Additionally, over 125 virologists, epidemiologists and health experts from around the globe recently signed a [statement](#) arguing reusables are safe as long as they are washed in between use. This may imply having advanced sanitation measures at stores that allow for cleaning reusables on site.

Ultimately, we need to follow the science. All the necessary protocols to fight the pandemic should also apply to reusables. This means sanitary hygiene and thorough washing. There is no doubt that businesses will need to implement more stringent safety measures for handling reusables. But this part is manageable. Instead of delaying plastic-bag bans and eliminating reusables, we must bring them back and plan a way forward with reusables in the picture. We need to envision a world where reusables are a natural part of a sustainable design and are

resilient to threats of viruses.

The plastic industry's response to the pandemic is merely a reflection of its desperation. The industry in pre-COVID times was already grappling with an [oversupply of plastics](#) converging with decreasing demand.

There is no better time for us to stand up to corporate deceit and ask our local leaders to reinstate plastic-bag bans and encourage businesses to allow reusables again while adhering to health and safety protocols.

Although much uncertainty remains around the pandemic, I am certain of one thing: our need to prioritize a sustainable future. As I ride my bike to Precycle these days and see the mounting piles of trash along the way, I am saddened for this moment but more galvanized to action, knowing that it is not too late to change course.

When I arrive lately, I am greeted by the handwritten sign hanging in our window, posted when quarantine began. It serves as a light at the end of what feels like for many of us, an endless tunnel. "We will hug soon."

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