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How 'green' are our choices, really?



Stefanie
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Kermit the Frog had it right when he said, "It's not easy being green." We all want to do the right thing for the environment, but it's very confusing. We are constantly bombarded with new "green" choices — compact fluorescent light bulbs, organic food, bio-fuels and even greener packaging. But are these choices really more

environmentally-friendly?

It's trickier than it seems. Close examination shows the choices aren't clear, and what we think is green might actually be worse for the environment. For example, organic foods are perceived to offer a better environmental choice — but only if they aren't transported thousands of miles.

Fluorescent light bulbs last longer and consume less energy — but they are loaded with toxic mercury lethal to humans and the environment.

Bio-fuels may create less air pollution — but they

may divert valuable, needed land from food production, straining the world's food supply.

Even the much-promoted reusable grocery bag is a case study in how tricky green can be.

Cotton reusable bags are very fossil fuel intensive and soil depleting. According to the Pesticide Action Network of North America, 25 per cent of the world's insecticides are used in the production of cotton.

Perhaps that's why most reusable grocery bags in Canada are made from heavy plastic.

Another not-so-green aspect of reusable bags is that most are made in China and shipped across the Pacific when they could be made here in Canada.

Surprisingly, the much-vilified plastic shopping bag may be much better for the environment than people think. Why? First, it's usually made in Canada, eliminating carbon-producing long-distance transport. Second, it's made from clean natural gas produced right here in Canada.

And without plastic bags what will we do with our household garbage? Using

your 99-cent reusable bag as a bin liner isn't going to happen, so now you'll buy kitchen catchers containing almost double the amount of plastic of the traditional bags you used to get for free. This will cost you more and result in more plastic being consumed.

Also, what happens to that reusable bag when it tears or the handle breaks? Contrary to what we've been told, reusable grocery bags cannot be recycled in Canada.

Ironically, traditional plastic shopping bags are

easily recycled across Ontario in blue bin programs and at participating retailers with a real environmental ethos. These bags are recyclable, and they're re-manufactured in Ontario into useful new products like drainage pipes and garden edging — creating much needed manufacturing jobs.

Even Kermit the Frog would be pleased with this green choice.

Stefanie Urbanowicz is a bio-chemical engineer with a degree from the University of Western Ontario. She is registered with the PEO and has worked in the auto parts sector for the past eight years.