

# Marin Farmers Markets' Path to Greener Pastures

## Long Term Goals:

1. To create a **zero waste marketplace**, where **reusable products are pervasive** and biodegradable products have replaced plastics and are **properly composted**.
2. To encourage and **educate customers** to be more eco-conscious and support them with the tools to **revolutionize their farmers market shopping experience**.
3. To encourage and educate farmers and food purveyors to **incorporate eco-friendly products** into their business models.
4. To **build partnerships** with local environmental groups to **increase public awareness** and waste management organizations to implement an effective waste stream.

## Actions:

1. MFM has made reusable products such as cotton tote bags, cotton produce bags, and SIGG's water bottles (coming soon) available at all of our markets. Our bags are made from organic cotton by a local company in San Rafael- a truly fresh and local alternative.



Organic Cotton Produce Bags, made locally, are designed to replace plastic bags used to weigh and separate produce. Good for everything from apples to leafy greens.

2. In 2007, MFM partnered with local community groups in Fairfax to create *Green Wednesdays* at the Fairfax Farmers Market (seasonal May-September). *Green Wednesdays* is a grass-roots educational campaign designed to heighten consumer awareness about waste and offer eco-friendly alternatives. Listed below are some of the activities that took place at the Fairfax Farmers Market during the 2007 season.
  - Hundreds of handmade reusable cloth bags, and biodegradable bags were donated and handed out by members of *The Inconvenient Group* and *Sustainable Fairfax* at the kick off to *Green Wednesdays*.
  - A display highlighting the tough realities of plastic was displayed and educational handouts were available at the market compliments of *Green Sangha*.



The *Reality of Plastic* display was a regular at the Fairfax Farmers Market in 2007.

- Market shoppers were encouraged to shrink their carbon footprints by bringing reusable bags, riding their bike or taking public transportation to the market, and composting their own food waste.
  - Perhaps most importantly, a forum was created each Wednesday for the community to have a conversation about the environmental and social repercussions of their daily choices. In addition to talking about local food and the immense benefits of investing food dollars directly in local agriculture, people were exploring the fringe impacts of their shopping experience, such as: how did you carry your food home, how did you get to the market, did you bring your own water bottle, coffee mug, cutlery, and where does all that waste go?
3. MFM has been a *Certified Green Business* since 2006. We do our best to be as eco-friendly as possible in the daily working of our office and at our seven farmers markets. Below are a handful of the greener alternatives we have incorporated into our operations in an effort to walk our talk:



#### **At the Markets**

- Plastic, glass, and aluminum are recycled thanks to single stream recycling by local waste management in Marin and Alameda counties.
- Portable bathrooms at our Sunday and Thursday farmers markets are solar powered and use biodegradable products to break down the waste.
- Trash bags are made from recycled plastic.
- Helium filled balloons have been eliminated from our markets.

#### **At the Office**

- 100% recycled paper products for office and market use

- Marketing materials are printed on 100% recycled paper by local printers
- Plastic water bottles have been eliminated from our office. We use glasses, a water pitcher, ceramic plates and silverware for both daily meals and for large meetings.
- Plastic, glass, aluminum, and unsoiled paper products are recycled.
- Electricity and heating and cooling usage at the office is carefully managed closely following recommendations from a PG&E energy audit.
- Office toilets use recycled water.

## **Challenges & Future Opportunities:**

1. MFM has researched and met with numerous local distributors and producers of biodegradable products. Our initial intention was to become a distributor of biodegradable products for our vendors, with the idea that we could pool purchasing power and get biodegradable products to our members at the lowest cost possible. Biodegradable bags initially seemed like a viable solution to plastics (See Attachment A). However, we came to realize that biodegradable bags would be but a bandaid solution to our single use bag addiction. Below are a few of the road blocks that we encountered. We hope sharing them will be helpful to farmers markets that are working toward zero-waste markets.
  - Many of the companies we met with were not prepared to fulfill orders on such large scale. Even the most well established companies, like BioBag USA, had never done a whole sale order of our size (see numbers below).
    - We estimated that our vendors on Sunday and Thursday would use approximately 640,000 bags every four months. (100 vendors x 200 bags x 2 markets x 4 weeks x 4 months = 640,000). This was conservative estimate; we tried to account for seasonal ups and downs and the fact that bag usage by vendor ranged from 500-40,000 a year (as reported by our farmers, Attachment C)
    - By placing an order of that size we were able to get a quote of \$75.35 for 1000 bags (7.5 cents per bag). Keep in mind that plastic bags typically cost \$10.00 for 1000 bags (1 cent per bag). Of course there are plenty of hidden costs, but the numbers at face value are daunting to most farmers.
  - The realities of becoming a distributor were too consuming. We realized it was a role that we could not take on with our limited staff and budget. Also, this would have been a pilot program, and the distributor could not have guaranteed the low price long term. Lastly, they would have had to make one shipment (in order to keep the price down) and we did not have ample storage space to store the bags.
  - We explored partnering with local distributors, like Earthware Biodegradables in Fairfax and LV Plastics (the company that currently supplies many of our members with their plastic bags). The idea was to create a similar cooperative buying model, to keep the prices low but with an outside distributor as the middleman. In summer 2007, biodegradable bags were usually 13 cents a bag, well over our bulk purchasing quote. After much discussion, none of these local distributors were willing to take a risk if MFM could not guarantee that their members would buy the bags. Because MFM could not create a policy (see #2

below) distributors were unwilling to purchase large enough orders to bring the costs of the bags down to 7 cents per bag.

2. MFM staff took a survey of vendors in summer 2007 with hopes of creating a policy to ban plastic bags (See Attachment C). Of the vendors that responded, the overwhelming response was that they would be interested in purchasing biodegradable alternatives but that **a mandatory policy should not be created.**
  - Although it was disappointing that a policy was not created, the realities of enforcing such a policy at the markets was daunting. Many biodegradable bags are not well labeled, making it difficult to decipher between plastic and certified biodegradable. Our markets are GMO-free, most biodegradable bags are not. The idea of regulating the use of certified GMO-free biodegradable bags at our markets was starting to sound like an overwhelming task.
  - Yet there are vendors who are interested in eliminating plastic from their business model. MFM has made a continuous effort to encourage their interest and have put like minded vendors in contact with one another, and have referred them to distributors of alternatives to plastic. We have also posted a list of distributors and producers of biodegradable and paper products on our website and have shared the same information in our first newsletter of 2008 (Attachment A).
  
3. MFM manages seven farmers markets in seven different locations with over 300 participating farmers, food purveyors, and artisans. Four of those markets take place in Marin County where currently there is **no established system to properly compost biodegradable wares and food scrapes.** Because not many Marin residents compost at home, these biodegradable products would likely end up in the landfill. It is our understanding that biodegradable bags must be in an aerobic composting waste system in order to biodegrade.
  - Alameda County (3 of our markets are in the East Bay) does have a composting program and MFM is looking to partner with StopWaste.org to create a viable composting program at each East Bay Market.
  - MFM is learning how to compost at its office and is looking to create a gorilla composting program in Marin with its farmers and potentially with a local café that attends the market and is creating a composting program on their farm in Vacaville to compost their own biodegradable materials.



Members of Sustainable Fairfax & The Inconvenient Group hand out biodegradable bags and reusable hand-made cloth bags. It was a family affair!

4. MFM is continuing to build relationships with local grass roots environmental groups, and is currently working on an educational brochure with *Green Sangha* and *Sustainable San Rafael*. We would like to have a educational booth at all of our markets and look forward to creating displays and recruiting volunteers from these local community groups to engage customers in a conversation about what they can do to shrink their carbon-footprint at the farmers market and elsewhere.
5. MFM Board of Directors agreed at their February 2008 meeting that ridding our markets of plastic is a priority. They are committed to implementing viable solutions and view reusable bags and paper bags as two likely options. A conundrum that they continue to face is the question of how to transport leafy greens. Biodegradable bags would be an alternative but, given the issues surrounding GMOs and composting facilities, they have their doubts. We're definitely open to suggestions.
6. The Fairfax Farmers Market, given the tremendous community support of *Green Wednesdays 2007*, is primed to be a plastic-free market place. The manager of the Fairfax Farmers Market hopes to gain the support of MFM's Board of Directors and the 20-30 MFM members who participate in the Fairfax Farmers Market to initiate such a pilot program. This will be an exciting forum in which initiate the transition toward zero-waste markets, especially because the local community is so committed to the idea; the town of Fairfax proposed an ordinance in 2007 to ban plastic bags. Creating a marketplace that is truly free of plastics will require producers, shoppers, market management and MFM board to be flexible and willing to weather initial inconveniences in order to achieve the goal of a plastic-free market.



Fairfax youth decorating her very own reusable cloth bag.

*It's time we start thinking about our children, and our children's children.  
Our daily acts do make a difference, including the food we eat and the bag we shop with.*

## Attachment A

(Handout for MFM Board of Directors March 2007)



### BIODEGRADABLE BAGS

- Decompose in 10 to 40 days in municipal composting environment, becoming a natural part of our environmental lifecycle.
- Decompose in a natural setting at rate comparable to other naturally biodegradable materials, such as paper, leaves and food.
- Biobags are made from GMO free corn, grown in Europe and manufactured in Norway.
- Printed with Soy-based inks and dyes.
- Biobags "breathe," allowing heat and moisture to escape, meaning produce stays fresher longer.

#### COST

\$75.35 for 1000 bags  
.07 per bag

### PLASTIC (POLYETHYLENE) BAGS

- It takes about 20 to 1000 years for plastic bags to break down.
- Even then, they never decompose. They only break apart in to smaller parts.
- Polyethylene comes from petroleum, a non-renewable resource.
- An estimated 3 million barrels of oil are used to produce the 27.5 billion plastic bags used annually in CA.
- Five of the six most hazardous chemicals to produce (EPA) are commonly used by the plastic industry [propylene, phenol, ethylene, polystyrene, and benzene].

#### COST

\$10 for 1000 bags  
.01 per bag

The difference in cost is staggering. We know.

But think about all the hidden environmental costs of plastic bags.

This is similar to our efforts to educate our consumers about the hidden costs of "cheap food." MFMA has the opportunity to set the precedent for biodegradable bags in the market place.

So many businesses (and Counties) have expressed interest, someone needs to jump.

We estimate that our Thursday and Sunday Civic Center markets could use 640,000 bags a quarter. That's *100 farmers x 200 bags x 2 markets x 4 markets a month x 4 months = 640,000 bags*

Although MFMA is planning to store and distribute the bags to our members, we cannot subsidize the entire project. Possible solutions include:

- Pass the cost along to the consumer. *IKEA is now charging 5 cents per bag, common in the UK*
- Vendor pays for it and absorbs the cost.
- Cost is reflected in price of product.
- Please share your ideas on how MFMA can be an example of not just environmental consciousness but ACTION too.

Note: We estimate that our Thursday and Sunday Civic Center markets could use 640,000 bags every **four months**. That's 100 farmers x 200 bags x 2 markets x **4 weeks** a month x 4 months = 640,000 bags

## Attachment B

(As seen on our website [www.marinfarmersmarket.org](http://www.marinfarmersmarket.org))

Home Page:

### GREENING THE MARIN FARMERS MARKETS



Marin Farmers Markets is committed to making our farmers market operations as earth-friendly as possible. In 2006 we took the first step by becoming a certified [Bay Area Green Business](#). In 2007, MFM was awarded the [Acterra Business Environmental Award](#) for Environmental and Sustainability Education.

Currently, MFM staff and Board of Directors are working toward creating zero waste farmers markets, which will include replacing plastics with GMO-free biodegradable products, and encouraging customers to bring their own reusable items. The transition presents a variety of challenges for our seven Bay Area farmers markets, but we are excited about finding viable solutions.

Please do your part to eliminate plastic from the farmers market by bringing your own reusable bags, containers, mugs, even dining set! Need some inspiration? Check out a video highlighting [Green Wednesdays](#) at the Fairfax Farmers Market, an exciting partnership between Sustainable Fairfax [Sustainable Fairfax](#), The Inconvenient Group, and Marin Farmers Markets, intent on raising awareness on the importance reusable bags.

**Vendors interested in purchasing biodegradable products** please click below to view a list of local distributors and producers of biodegradable bags, cutlery, and containers.

[More...](#)

Second Page:

### ALTERNATIVES TO PLASTIC

(The following was also included in our 2008 Winter Newsletter to our members.)

Our markets are looking especially *green* these days. Awareness is on the rise about the benefits of eating locally grown food as well as the importance of bringing reusable bags and containers to eliminate excessive waste. But there is still a lot of work to be done. Californians use 19 billion plastic bags each year – or 600 bags every second (California Integrated Waste Management Board) and thousands of those bags are used at our farmers markets.

MFM believes that reusable bags are the best option, and we are proud to offer reusable

totes and produce bag, made from organic cotton by a local textile business in San Rafael, at the MFM info booth. Yet we also understand that there is a demand for single use bags, containers, and cutlery at our markets. In summer 2007, MFM members voiced an interest in replacing plastics with biodegradable products. Since then, it seems that customer demand and support continues to grow. Below is a list of resources to get you started on the path to greening your business, an exciting and creative process.

-BioBag USA. Producer of biodegradable bags in assorted sizes. Also available through many local distributors. (727) 789-1646; <http://www.biobagusa.com/>.

-Earthware Biodegradables. Local producer of biodegradable cutlery, based in Lagunitas. (800) 211-6747; [www.earthwarebiodegradables.com](http://www.earthwarebiodegradables.com)  
<http://www.earthwarebiodegradables.com>.

-Excellent Packaging & Supply. Distributor of biodegradable wares including bags, cutlery, cups, and serving containers, based in Richmond. (510) 243-9501 or (800) 317-2737; [www.excellentpackaging.com](http://www.excellentpackaging.com) <http://www.excellentpackaging.com>.

-Green Earth Office Supply. Distributor of biodegradable wares including bags, cutlery, cups, and serving containers, based in Santa Clara. (800) 327-8449, (408) 969-0900; <http://www.greenearthofficesupply.com>.

-Green Home. Distributor of biodegradable wares including bags, cutlery, cups, and serving containers, based in San Francisco (415) 282-6400; <http://www.greenhome.com>.

## **RESOURCES FROM SF ENVIRONMENT**

The San Francisco Department of the Environment is setting the curve when it comes to creating a waste system that accounts for biodegradable products. Below are two resources SF Environment created to assist business owners like yourself navigate the world of biodegradable products. Many thanks to SF Environment for their leadership.

[☞ List of Biodegradable Products](#) (Attached)

[☞ List of Biodegradable Product Distributors](#) (Attached)

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## Attachment C

Survey of Marin Farmers Markets Members – June 2007

### Let's Be the Change We Want to See in the World!

Farmers markets should be an example of sustainability and “walking the talk.” We currently have an opportunity to be a leader in getting rid of plastic. Of course, reusable cloth or canvas bags are the ideal and we want to educate our consumers on their use, but we use hundreds of thousands of plastic bags at our markets alone! We are thinking of being plastic-free. What do you think?

Please respond to the questions below. You can tear off the bottom of this page and include it along with your payment in your market envelope or mail it to us. You can also email us your responses at [info@marinfarmersmarket.org](mailto:info@marinfarmersmarket.org). Please send your responses to us **by Friday, July 13th**.

1. Would you be willing to buy GMO-free biodegradable bags instead of plastic bags?  
 Yes     No
2. Should MFMA create a policy requiring that all vendors use GMO-free biodegradable bags?  
 Yes     No
3. How many plastic bags do you purchase per year? \_\_\_\_\_ bags

Thank you for taking the time to respond to these questions!

### Results:

Total Responses	41
1. Would you be willing to buy GMO-free biodegradable bags instead of plastic bags?	
Yes	30
NO	9
Blank	2
2. Should MFMA create a policy requiring that all vendors use GMO-free biodegradable bags?	
Yes	15
NO	25
Blank	1

Plastic Bag use varied from 500-40,000 a year depending on products, seasonality of the farm's participation, and how many markets the farmer attends.