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Citizens Campaign for the Environment Testimony on Disposable Bag Legislation (HB5207 and HB5215)

Thank you for opportunity to provide testimony today. My name is Emmett Pepper, and I am the Connecticut Program Director for Citizens Campaign for the Environment (CCE). CCE is an 80,000 member, non-profit, non-partisan advocacy organization working to protect public health and the natural environment in New York State and Connecticut.

Disposable plastics are causing increasing amounts of devastation to our landscapes, waterways and aquatic wildlife. Plastic grocery bags are especially egregious, because they are easily blown away, due to their weight, and enter our waterways and landscapes. Plastics never really go away, they “photodegrade,” and break down to smaller particles. Once consequence resulting from our use—and disposal—of plastics, along with powerful ocean currents, have created two swirling vortexes of plastic, called gyres, in the Pacific Ocean, one of which measures twice the size of Texas, and another gyre in the Atlantic Ocean. In some parts of the Pacific, there is nine times as much plastic as there is plankton, the foundation of marine ecosystems. Additionally, when plastic bags flow into waterways, they endanger wildlife through entanglement by mimicking food. Turtles can mistake plastic bags for jellyfish and try to eat them, causing digestive problems and even death. Simply put, we need to reduce our plastic use, reuse what we use, and recycle plastics when we are done. In other words: reduce, reuse, recycle; in that order.

We are especially supportive of and impressed by, efforts to address this problem by using financial incentives. Representative Fawcett and Majority Leader should be commended for their legislative prowess in seeking out a successful model, in this case Ireland, and finding a way to emulate it here in Connecticut. In Ireland, after a similar fee system went into place, plastic bag use reduced by 90%. In contrast, voluntary store-based recycling efforts now in place are resulting in single-digit rates of return. There is little reason to believe that even with extremely effective educational programs, recycling rates will ever come close to those kinds of numbers.

CCE supports directing any funds generated by adopting a fee on disposable check out bags to fund Department of Environmental Protection programs, is laid out in HB 5215. DEP funding cannot sustain any more cuts and this environmental law should be dedicated to environmental programs. CCE suggests also including language to direct the DEP and stores to place signs in the parking lot and at entrances reminding consumers to bring their reusable bags.

CCE would support HB 5215 as it stands because, as a coastal state, plastic bags can have an undue impact. However, we have several suggestions to strengthen the legislation going forward:

While plastic bags are the most widely used, most destructive to aquatic life, and most difficult to recycle; paper bags have their issues, too. The solution to this problem is not switching from plastic to paper. The solution is reusable bags. For that reason, we support the legislation including paper bags, as does HB5207, to achieve the ultimate solution; the wide use of reusable bags.

CCE strongly supports local municipal rights to go further and ban bags, if desired. CCE adamantly opposes any measures that pre-empt municipalities from banning bags. CCE worked with local officials and citizens in Westport to help achieve the first East Coast ban on plastic bags since Nantucket banned plastic bags and polystyrene in 1990. Local governments are the laboratories of democracy and incubators of innovation. Municipalities should be allowed to enact stronger legislation to reduce disposable bag proliferation. CCE recognizes that some guidance to the towns may be appropriate for consistency. As the state passes good, strong environmental laws, our towns should be able to retain their right to enact a stronger local law. Lastly, I understand that there are some questions regarding which types of plastic bags would fall under this fee program and at which stores. It is CCE's position that throwaway checkout bags are unnecessary. There are valid health and sanitation reasons for using plastic bags for produce, meats, etc. CCE believes state policy is an excellent method to motivate sustainable consumer and retailer behaviors resulting in a shift from disposable check bags to the regular and consistent use of reusable bags. While we do not believe that we should be using any of these checkout bags at all, we recognize that the larger stores, like grocery stores and big box stores, are where the most bags are consumed at once.

Throwaway bags are unnecessary, unwieldy and wasteful. Short of a full ban, plastic bag pollution is best addressed through financial incentives such as the one before you today. We urge you to avoid unforeseen consequences and include all throwaway bags in the law. CCE urges you to consider our recommendations for this bill and to act quickly to enact disposable bag legislation this session and move our state towards a more sustainable future. Thank you.