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Cut the plastic: 12 percent of the world's oil production is in the bag

by Gregory R. Norfleet · News · January 14, 2009

The plastic bag you're using to carry that loaf of bread, pound of butter and dozen eggs out of the grocery store each week represents 12 percent of the world oil production. The Green Man Group wants you to consider a reusable cloth bag, made from a renewable resource.

"If we're using 12 percent each year," sixth-grader Bradley Arp said, "we will not have oil for as long as we hope."

Arp and fellow sixth-grade Science Club members Mason Taylor, Adam O'Neil and Sam McCrory want to reduce the use of plastic bags in West Branch – first – and change people's shopping habits one bag at a time.

Plastic bags take hundreds of years to decompose, O'Neil said. And when they do, Arp continued, they leave a toxic substance in the ground.

"We just want to help," O'Neil said. "A little help can go a long way."

Like other Science Club teams, the Green Man Group is pursuing an eCybermission contest award. They started their project in September and have been looking at the rate people recycle and reuse plastic grocery bags.

They have garnered some donations of cloth bags from Dewey's Jack & Jill, Wal-Mart, Hy-Vee, Hills Bank and Toshiba.

They took those bags and passed them out to eight families, who are volunteering to give them a try.

The group will later survey the families to see what stores they shopped at, how much money they spent in each trip, the days they did their shopping and the number of bags used on each trip.

One issue: Does it feel awkward to carry empty bags into the store?

The team hopes to draw attention to the fact that so many of the grocery bags do not get recycled.

They even ordered T-shirts that say "Got bags? We do!" on the front with a picture of a cloth bag. On the back it says: "Do Something Drastic ... Cut the plastic!"

O'Neil points people to www.reusablebags.com, a company which sells reusable cloth bags. Their Web site includes a counter which, at this writing, stated that some 16.9 billion plastic bags have been consumed this year. Yep, that's just 2009.

The team would like to convince the West Branch City Council to ban them as other places, like San Francisco, has. Whole counties have done the same in an effort to clean up the environment.

"If West Branch uses only cloth bags, maybe that will give ideas to other towns," Taylor said.

The pupils say that cloth bags are not for every store, but they want to make a difference.

"It's a fun project," Arp said. "It's not just for a trip to Washington D.C."

Taylor agreed.

"It's fun to be part of something big," he said.

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