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Reusable grocery bags may pose public health risk, CPIA study finds; over 30% of bags had unsafe levels of bacterial contamination, 40% had yeast or mold, some had intestinal fecal bacteria in their surface

May 21, 2009 — Canadian Plastics Industry Assn. (CPIA)

Forestweb rewrites headlines for editorial clarity. The original story and headline begin below.

Original Headline: Reusable grocery bags may pose public health risk

MISSISSAUGA, Ont., May 21, 2009 (press release) — There is a growing trend to reusable packaging overall in an effort to encourage reduction. The position of the plastics industry is clear. The industry strongly supports reduction and reuse, and recognizes use of reusables as good environmental practice, but it does not want to see these initiatives inadvertently compromise public health and safety. The industry believes that appropriate research and investigation must be pursued. This testing sample is but a first step.

Laboratory testing of reusable grocery bags by two independent laboratories was undertaken this spring. To ensure independence, a third laboratory was engaged to provide oversight and evaluative commentary of the results -- Toronto-based Sporometrics, the foremost experts in many aspects of fungal and environmental bacterial testing in Canada. The study found that reusable grocery bags pose a public health risk.

Subject-matter expert, Dr. Richard Summerbell, Director of Research at Sporometrics, provided interpretation of the test results as well as critical direction and assistance in the writing of this report. Dr. Summerbell is a noted microbiologist who served as the Chief of Medical Mycology for Ontario Ministry of Health, Laboratory Services Branch from 1991-2000 and was senior researcher at the Centraalbureau voor Schimmelcultures, the world's most extensive fungal culture collection and mycological center at the Royal Netherlands Academy, in Utrecht, the Netherlands. He has also authored over 150 scientific papers.

The results compiled in "A Microbiological Study of Plastic Reusable Bags and 'First or single-use' Plastic Bags" show that reusables are a breeding ground for bacteria and pose public health risks – food poisoning, skin infections such as bacterial boils, allergic reactions, triggering of asthma attacks, and ear infections.

Over 30% of the bags had unsafe levels of bacterial contamination, 40% had yeast or mold and some of the bags had intestinal faecal bacteria embedded in their surface when there should have been 0.

The test results have been shared with the federal Sub-Committee on Food Safety which is currently looking into the safety of Canada's food supply chain, federal and provincial ministers of health, medical associations across the country as well as public health officials for immediate action.

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Vice President, EPIC

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