



20 January 2018

Waste & Resource Recovery Team
Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning
PO Box 500
Melbourne, VIC
wastepolicy@delwp.vic.gov.au

Dear Minister / Director,

Response To Reducing Plastic Pollution Survey

Geelong Sustainability welcomes the opportunity to submit a written response to the Reducing Plastic Pollution Survey. We strongly agree with the analysis in the accompanying discussion paper that 'plastic pollution is an urgent environmental problem' and commend the Andrews' government for taking action.

Geelong Sustainability is an incorporated not-for-profit community group focusing on sustainability-related matters in the wider Geelong area. Our mission is *to inform, inspire and connect communities to create a sustainable future and to protect our natural environment*. We have over 140 financial members composed of individuals, families and local businesses. We have several thousand followers on social media and over 1800 email subscribers. In 2015 we adopted the One Planet Living Principles as a guiding framework for our work. We were the first community organisation to be invited to join the G21 Environment Pillar. In addition we have representatives on Barwon Water's consultative committee and several City of Greater Geelong advisory panels. We are active collaborating with various environmental and sustainability organisations in our region and beyond. We are also a member of the Plastic-free Victoria Alliance.

The ABC TV Series, *War on Waste* has raised people awareness that we cannot continue are thoughtless consumption of finite natural resources. Waste reduction is becoming a major focus for our group. We are planning a range of activities and to spread the zero waste messages at community events in the coming months. We have submitted an application to the Climate Change Innovation grants for funding for us to partner with 5 other local organisations to establish a zero waste festival methodology. Through these initiatives our purpose will be to encourage and support people to rethink their habits and to reduce their consumption of single use plastic products.

Like most problems, the best way to resolve it is to stop it at its source. We need to reduce the amount of plastic being produced, by reducing the amount of plastic we are consuming. Just a generation ago, we packaged our products in re-usable or recyclable materials – glass, metals, and other products designed to last, that could be washed out and used repeatedly. Back to the future is the way to go. Alternative products are readily available. The transition will be relatively easy once the legislative framework is in place and stakeholders are engaged in solving this urgent environmental problem!

Our group firmly believes that plastic bags no longer have a place in our community. There are many inexpensive alternative products that do not have detrimental impacts on our ecosystems. Our short-term convenience cannot be at the long term detriment of the environment.

Sincerely

Vicki Perrett
President

On behalf of the committee, members and supporters of Geelong Sustainability

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Following are Geelong Sustainability Group's specific responses to the survey questions.

Survey Questions

1a. Do you support a ban on single-use lightweight plastic shopping bags? 1b Why?

Yes, Geelong Sustainability most certainly supports a ban for the following compelling reasons:

- Lightweight plastic shopping bags are made from fossil fuels, a non-renewable resource. They are supplied in excessive amounts and used only once or possibly twice.
- Currently, only 5% of single-use plastic bags are recycled. Roughly 50% are buried in landfills and a small proportion is made into durable goods. The remaining bags are 'unaccounted for' ie. lost in the environment where they ultimately wash out to sea through drains and waterways.
- Bags cause litter issues when blown out of bins and landfill, blocking drains and lodging in waterways resulting in large clearing costs to local and state government and community groups.
- As litter, bags cause entanglement and ingestion issues with birds, turtles and other animals. 44% of all seabirds, 33% of cetaceans, all sea turtles and a growing list of fish species have been documented with plastic in or around their bodies. In some areas of the ocean, concentrations of plastic have been measured to be 40 times greater than that of plankton! Ingestion of plastic, mistaken as food, can lead to internal blockages, dehydration, starvation and ultimately death for many of these animals.
- Small plastic particles, called 'POPs' – persistent organic pollutants, readily absorb toxic chemicals such as pesticides and herbicides which are used all around the world and leach into our oceans. They are then eaten by marine life, which we ultimately eat – creating all sorts of implications for our own health.

2a. Should a ban include thick plastic shopping bags? 2b Why?

Yes, we think a ban should include thick plastic bags for the following reasons:

- As the government is going to the effort of bringing in new legislation then it may as well solve the problem properly! Other states are regretting loopholes in their legislation.
- Banning heavier bags now will avoid confusion and differing retailer approaches later.
- Thicker plastic bags are still plastic with the same environmental issues as thinner bags. So while they get used more than once due to their strength, they still cause entanglements in the marine environment and once degraded pieces are ingested in the same way as thinner bags.
- A meager 15 cent levy will not deter an increase in the use of heavier bags once lightweight bags are banned. If there is no ban on thicker bags, we would suggest a substantial levy of at least 50 cents per bag initially, to be increased each year with all money going to the EPA for compliance monitoring.

3a. Should a ban include plastic bags that break down over time such as biodegradable, degradable or compostable bags? 3b why?

Yes, biodegradable, degradable and compostable bags should be included in the ban.

- Laws need to prevent green washing.
- These bags do not dissolve in water and are therefore just as toxic as other plastic bags in waterways and in the marine environment.
- Compostable bags require specialized hot composting facilities only available commercially. Hence they are misleading to public as most cannot be cold composted at home.
- As degradable bags break down into smaller pieces sooner, they resemble food for wildlife even more than standard bags.
- 'Biodegradable' plastics contain toxic agents that make them very slow to decompose, if at all, in the marine environment.
- Degradable and compostable bags entering the soft-plastic recycling system cause issues with the end product.

- Bioplastics may be a solution in the future, but until there is a certified standard for a product that is home-compostable (i.e. at low temperatures) and dissolves in water, all biodegradable, degradable and compostable bags should be banned.

4. If lightweight plastic bags were banned, we will need to consider exemptions for some purposes like medical or security activities. Are there any types of businesses, organisations or activities you think should be exempt from a plastic bag ban?

- Yes, exemptions could be given to health, medical, policing and security applications at least in short term. Recent media stories have reported how medical facilities generate up to 4 times the waste of the general community. So going forward, encouragement must be provided to implement waste reduction products and practices.
- Another recent media story reported on a recycling trial of police breathalyzer straws by Vic Police. However other states now have straw-free equipment. Why can't VIC?

5. If lightweight plastic shopping bags were banned, what alternative bags would you prefer to use?

We would recommend making a full ban on plastic bags and thereby not allowing heavier weight plastic bags. Our shopping bag preferences would be for:

- fabric bags – made from recycled fabric, e.g. Boomerang Bags
- green bags - made from recycled plastic
- paper bags - made from at least 40% recycled paper
- 'paper bags' – made from other natural cellulosic fibres such as bamboo.

6. What other options should the government consider to reduce plastic packaging?

We urge the State Government to consider the following initiatives:

- Legislate a container deposit scheme ASAP.
- Ban plastic barrier bags for fruit and vegetables and replace with paper and/or encourage re-useable light-fabric produce bags.
- Ban polystyrene produce trays and replace with cardboard, bamboo or re-useable PET trays.
- Move away from plastic film on vegetables and fruit.
- Invest in R&D to find an alternative to plastic film.
- Permit consumers to leave any unwanted plastic packaging at the retail store. This action would encourage retailers to rethink the use of excessive packaging with suppliers.
- Facilitate consumer group input to the Australian packaging covenant.
- Facilitate community and industry advocacy.

7. What else should the Victorian Government do to reduce the impacts of litter at a local level across the state?

We think the following initiatives would be effective:

- Increase penalties for littering and ensure EPA has adequate funding and powers.
- Ban balloon releases in all public spaces.
- Ban or place a levy on plastic straws.
- Ban smoking near public beaches, playgrounds and waterways. Cigarette butts are one of the most common items in litter audits. Butts are composed of synthetic materials that do not decompose.
- Place a heavy penalty and enforcement on butt littering.
- Introduce a 1 cent refund scheme on cigarette butts.
- Introduce a tax on single-use plastic food containers to encourage food outlets to move away from plastic to cardboard.
- Facilitate grants to community groups that engage local businesses in reducing single-use plastic items (The Last Straw, Responsible Cafés, Boomerang Bags etc.).

8. How can Victorians be encouraged to further reduce the impacts of litter in their communities?

We think the following initiatives would be effective:

- Introduce a container deposit scheme to reduce litter and improve recycling behaviours.

- A statewide education campaign about the global (and local) crisis of plastic pollution, landfill problems, the cost of our convenience to our environment, our economy and our health.
- Require local governments to develop waste reduction strategies and to consult. The City of Greater Geelong will run out of landfill capacity in less than 8 years.
- Ensure adequate funding for Sustainability Victoria's campaigns especially the Resource-Smart Schools program.
- Provide funding for municipal waste education officers and/or local community groups and the fledging repair cafes.
- Educate the public about the full impact of their consumer choices so they understand and are required to take responsibility for the total life cycle of their purchases: resources, usage and disposal.
- Advocate to the federal government to ban microbeads.

9. What other plastic pollution issues should government, business and communities' work together to address?

We think the following additional issues should be addressed:

- Expand the options for how the public can recycle soft plastics.
- Work toward a ban on polystyrene where a substitute is possible and support R&D on a polystyrene alternative.
- Work towards containing microfibres from clothing by requiring filters in washing machines. Invest in R&D to contain microfibres.
- Ban fishing bait bags. Work toward re-sealable PET containers with a 'bring it back' refund scheme.

10. What strategies to address plastic pollution do you think would be most effective?

We think the following initiatives would be effective:

- Opportunities for school children & community groups to visit waste handling/recycling facilities so they can really see and understand the scale of the problem.
- Develop initiatives that encourage product responsibility at manufacturer, distributor and retail levels.
- Acknowledge the need for a circular economy where products are designed with reuse or recycling in mind.
- Engage industries to move away from single-use items toward re-useable products.
- Demand that new products contain a percentage of recycled material to boost the recycling industry.
- Include plastic pollution in school curriculum.

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