GREENS RESPONSE TO RECYCLING CRISIS

Waste reduction and resource recovery

Australia's recycling industry is in crisis and plastic pollution is choking our oceans. This is the inevitable result of a consumer economy focused on profits today, not whether we have a healthy planet tomorrow. We can start to fix this by rebooting our recycling system, by buying recycled products, and by weaning ourselves off plastic.

> HOW DID WE GET TO A CRISIS?

Australians love their recycling. And we're good at it too. For years we've been sorting our recycling into the yellow-lid bin. This has stopped millions of tonnes of waste from going to landfill and helped build an industry that employs 50,000 people across the country. The rule of thumb is that for every one job in landfilling waste, six jobs can be created recycling that waste.[1]

But Australia's recycling industry is in crisis. The catalyst is China's decision to stop importing recycling unless it has very low levels of contamination. A large part of Australia's recycling industry, particularly kerbside recycling, has been working on the assumption of being able to sell large volumes of low quality material to China at good prices. From collection through to sorting, this has encouraged a focus on quantity at the expense of quality. Local governments have signed contracts with overly enthusiastic recyclers. State governments have patted themselves on the back as recycling rates increased.

The federal government have stopped paying attention altogether. They disbanded the COAG Standing Committee on Environment & Water. They abolished the reference committee on product stewardship. And they've done next to nothing to implement the National Waste Policy agreed to by COAG in 2009.

But now the chickens have come home to roost. There are tonnes and tonnes of low quality material collected through kerbside that no one wants to buy. This material is being stockpiled at great risk to the health and safety of surrounding communities. In all likelihood, some of it will end up as landfill.

The Greens have a plan to reboot the recycling industry to bring it up to scratch, to help build domestic demand for recycling, and to stop the generation of so much waste in the first place.

[1] Environment Victoria, *Victoria - the Green Jobs State: Seizing the opportunities*, 2009.

> CEFC TO REBOOT RECYCLING

Recycling is a climate change issue. When something is thrown into landfill, all of the energy that goes into making a product is wasted. Throwing away materials that could have been recycled is a form of greenhouse pollution. Alternatively, when waste materials are recycled into new products this replaces the need to use more energy extracting and refining virgin materials. In effect, recycling 'sequesters' the greenhouse gases that are 'embodied' in the products we buy.

The Clean Energy Finance Corporation (CEFC) already has waste reduction as criteria for its screening of investment for emissions reduction. The Greens will make an additional appropriation to the CEFC of $500 million over five years to invest in waste avoidance and resource recovery initiatives. This would include financing for infrastructure and programs that:

- Increase the diversion of products and materials destined for landfill, such as municipal 'tip shops'.
- Improve source separation of recycling and the quality of material collected through kerbside.
- Improve sorting of recycling at material recovery facilities.
- Assist manufacturers to increase the amount of recycled material they use, particularly for plastic and paper products.

Where infrastructure and programs service the surrounding local area, CEFC financing would be contingent upon state governments matching this funding dollar-for-dollar. Currently, most state governments collect revenue from landfill levies. However, not all of this revenue is being hypothecated back into waste avoidance and resource recovery. Instead, state governments are using landfill levies to prop up general revenue.

When assessing whether to invest in waste avoidance and resource recovery projects, the CEFC would be required to take into account the rate of greenhouse gas abatement. The 'sequestration' achieved through recycling differs from one material to the next, and depends on the type of material and the type of recycling. For example, old glass bottles can be

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reprocessed into new glass bottles over and over again. Doing so recovers the energy used to extract sand and to refine it into glass. However, a lot of glass that is collected for recycling is too contaminated to be used to make new glass bottles. Instead, this glass is often 'down-cycled' for use in road base. While this is still a form of recycling, and it replaces the need to mine virgin sand, it does not achieve the same level of greenhouse gas abatement as does turning glass into new bottles.

> NATIONAL CONTAINER DEPOSIT SCHEME

After years of resistance from the beverage industry, most states have now introduced a container deposit schemes (CDS). The Greens would nationalise these schemes under the Product Stewardship Act to ensure that all states are covered and to ensure a consistent approach. Nationalising CDS would is also likely to help ensure imported containers—both filled and empty—are properly captured, effectively applying a 'shadow tariff'.

The benefits of CDS are all the more important in the wake of the recycling crisis. CDS inherently improves the quality of the material collected. By separating glass, plastic and aluminium at the point of collection, material collected through CDS is much better quality. Glass collected in South Australia, where CDS has been in place for decades, fetches three times more than glass collected elsewhere through kerbside.[2] Further, by diverting a large amount of glass out of kerbside, CDS reduces contamination of remaining materials, which will also improve the quality of recycling.

> MANDATORY PRODUCT STEWARDSHIP

The principle of container deposit schemes and other product stewardship schemes is to provide an incentive for people to recycle and for manufacturers to make recyclable products. In effect, the cost of recycling is built into the cost of the product.

There are a number of schemes in place under the Product Stewardship Act. To date these schemes have been largely voluntary and have failed to be as successful as they could be. The Greens would introduce mandatory product stewardship schemes for a range of problematic waste streams, including:

- All e-waste, including televisions, computers, mobile phones, fluorescent lights and batteries.
- Tyres.
- Mattresses.

These schemes would be entirely self-funding. Recycling targets would be set for industry. Producers would then put a refundable levy on to the price of a product that consumers would get back at the end of the product's life.

These waste streams need to be addressed through product stewardship as they are not able to be collected through kerbside recycling. In doing so, CDS and other product stewardship schemes would create local collection hubs for other 'awkward' materials. Recycling of polystyrene, hard plastics, furniture, white goods and other bulky household items would all be able to 'piggy back' off the creation of recycling hubs for CDS and other product stewardship schemes.

> COMMUNITY GRANTS FOR REUSE & RECYCLING

The bulk of recycling is handled in large scale industrial facilities. But big is not always best. Around the country, community groups and social enterprises have set up reuse, repurposing and recycling ventures. These ventures often deal with parts of the waste stream that the larger facilities tend to overlook. Their labour intensive, high quality approach is an important part of rebooting recycling. In particular, community groups and social enterprises are well suited to run local collection hubs that would be set up under product stewardship schemes.

The Greens would allocate $10 million for grants to community groups and social enterprises that run reuse, repurposing and recycling ventures, as well as for associated education and awareness programs, particularly those focused on reducing plastic waste.

> BUY LESS AND BUY RECYCLED

Saving the recycling industry also requires increasing the demand for recycled products. It's not enough to improve the quality of material being collected and sorted. End-markets for recycled material actually need to be developed. Doing so will encourage local manufacturers to use recycled material, particularly plastic and paper that was previously being exported to China.

Governments can lead the way. Government is a very large buyer and it can use its purchasing power to help create new markets. The Greens would set mandatory targets for all government departments in relation to the recycled content of materials that they buy directly or that is provided by private contractors. This would include government procurement of paper and other office equipment, hospitality and cleaning contracts, and civil engineering.

This would be done in conjunction with state and local governments, and would also include commitments to avoid consumption. To make this commitment a reality, the Greens would make the provision of grants to state and local government contingent up meeting procurement targets. Unless state and local governments commit to buy-recycle, they won't get funding.

> THE INEVITABLE PHASE OUT OF SINGLE-USE PLASTICS

Improving recycling is important, but it's not enough. The core of the problem is that we consume too much plastic. Overconsumption of materials is contributing to global

[2] COAG Standing Council on Environment and Water, *Packaging Impacts Decision Regulation Impact Statement*, March 2014.

warming, depriving future generations of resources, and polluting the planet.

Our consumption of plastics is the big problem. It is everywhere. Because a lot of it is so small it escapes the waste stream and ends up in the sea. A recent report by the World Economic Forum warned that, on currents trends, there will be more plastic than fish in the ocean by 2050.[3] Studies have shown that microplastics have been found in a majority of drinking water supplies all around the world.[4]

The impact of plastic pollution on the marine environment is horrendous. Dolphins, seals, turtles and other large marine animals are killed and maimed when they become entangled in waste plastic. Birds die after ingesting chunks of plastic—albatrosses have been discovered with whole toothbrushes in their intestines. Plastic is breaking down into minute pieces—microplastics—that are so small they are actually being absorbed into the body of marine organisms.

We have to get serious about marine plastics. We are literally choking our oceans. The community is alarmed and active, and are looking for government to act. The UK Government has recently called for all Commonwealth countries to ban single use plastics. In Australia, local governments are investigating using by-laws to ban plastic take-away containers. A phase out of single-use plastics is inevitable.

The Greens will work with stakeholders towards a nationwide phase out of single-use plastics for take-away food, including straws, containers, lids and other plastic packaging. This would be done in conjunction with industry, scientists, innovators, consumer and community groups, and state and local governments. The Plastics CRC (see below) will provide the platform to drive this change as seamlessly as possible.

But this is only the beginning. A phase out of single-use plastics will lay down the pathway to ween ourselves off plastic. Properly tackling the problem will require an overhaul of the entire supply chain over many years but we must invest in this action now.

> BAN MICROBEADS & PLASTIC BAGS

While plastics are an enormous problem that will take a long time to solve, we need action that can reduce the amount of marine plastic pollution immediately.

The Greens support a national ban on single-use plastic bags by all states. 180 million plastics bags are entering the ocean each year.[5] We have talked about this too long. It's time to act.

The Greens also introduce an immediate ban on microbeads. Industry has had their chance to act. Government needs to step in immediately.

> PLASTICS CRC

Marine plastic pollution is a global problem that needs global solutions. But Australia needs to be active locally too. A 2016 senate inquiry into marine plastics recommended that the government support research to establish the extent of the threat posed by marine plastics.

The Greens would establish a Plastics Co-operative Research Centre (CRC) to lead Australia's research efforts into reducing plastic waste, cleaning up our oceans and finding end-markets for recovered plastic. Federal funding of $50 million over five years would be provided. The CRC would attract further investment from industry and academic partners to examine the threat that marine plastics pose to environmental and human health, and the effectiveness of current policies aimed at reducing plastics waste and the harm of marine plastics. The Plastics CRC would be based in Hobart to leverage off the hub of internationally renowned marine scientists.

The Greens would also develop a comprehensive marine plastics threat abatement plan on the back of the work of the CRC. The threat abatement plan would detail measures to be undertaken by the federal government to prevent and mitigate the impact of marine plastics and other debris on marine life.

> NATIONAL WASTE POLICY

As well as addressing issues like product stewardship, procurement, standardised data collection and industry activity codes, a National Waste Policy is important in setting benchmarks for the states and providing an overarching policy framework. The best starting point is to fully implement the 16 point National Waste Plan agreed to by all state government in 2009.[6]

The Greens would also recommit the federal government to further developing a National Waste Policy in consultation with the states, including binding national targets to achieve:

- 90% recovery of municipal waste by 2030;
- 75% recycling of packaging waste by 2030;
- a maximum of 10% landfilling of waste by 2030;
- mandated gas capture at large landfill sites; and
- a prohibition on incineration of waste.

This would be based on the adoption of the Circular Economy approach developed by the European Union and being urged by a number of waste stakeholders.

A National Waste Policy would provide for the harmonisation of labelling, data collection and calculation methods for waste and recycling across the states. This would include adopting the Australasian Recycling Label (ARL) to provide easy to understand recycling information for consumers.

[3] World Economic Forum, *The New Plastics Economy: Rethinking the future of plastics*, January 2016.
[4] The Guardian, *Plastic fibres found in tap water around the world, study reveals*, 6 September 2017.
[5] http://www.boomerangalliance.org.au/banplasticbags

[6] National Waste Policy, http://www.environment.gov.au/protection/national-waste-policy

A National Waste Policy would also outline how all tiers of government should give concessions to recycled content during the evaluation process for procurement.