

Aust & Asia Plastic Bags



9th October 2019

To: Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

To the Senate Standing Committee,

Re: Product Stewardship Amendment (Packaging and Plastics) Bill 2019 : Is banning certain plastic bags truly the answer?

I have written to voice our concerns over the proposed bill, specifically the products stipulated under "Division 5 – Prohibition of certain plastics ^40M Prohibited plastics". While I understand the need for rubbish to not contaminant our waterways, rivers and oceans, the issue is primarily **not a plastic products issue** but rather a problem with **littering and inadequate waste management systems**. There are three things we must necessarily take into account: the history of plastic bags, the alternatives and waste management systems.

If you take a look back in **history**, firstly, the trend for businesses in the 1970s was to use paper bags for customers to carry their good. Think about the old milk bar or shopping centre who would offer paper bags to carry groceries; that was the prevailing paradigm. The rhetoric and necessary concern at that time was the rising deforestation

rate. This deforestation was destroying local habitats resulting in biodiversity loss and direct loss of wildlife, As such, animal life is getting killed due to rapid deforestation. In this era, plastic bags were offered as an alternative product, being manufactured from by-products or waste from the petroleum manufacturing process.

As time progresses, our innovation and ingenuity meant, plastic bags could be made thinner – and thus, the use of the thinner type of bags became more commonplace as seen in the category “Division 5 – Prohibition of certain plastics ^40M Prohibited plastics”. These plastic bags were manufactured and engineered for the purpose of causing less impact on the environment. Understanding the history demonstrates that the argument that plastic bags destroy the planet (e.g. ocean life) is not the whole picture of the plastic bag ban.

Rather than help the planet, the lack of **alternatives** has meant that many retail customers and companies are using paper products instead. The problem here is that paper products need to be over three times as thick to offer the same comparable strength to the plastic bags. According to the World Bank, the world has lost 1.3 million square kilometres of forest since 1990. They found that in the 20th Century the Earth's total available forest area shrank from 50 million square kilometres to 40 million square kilometres¹. Thus, while the public and many institutions and companies push for a no plastic agenda with the slogans like ‘these resources are sustainable’, “trees can be replanted” “it can be recycled” – our use of our limited wood supply on a global level tells us otherwise. In fact, with more people turning to paper products, the demand for trees and the rate of deforestation –and with it, the risk to animal life and biodiversity- has increased.

The current push for moving people away from plastic products –from some facets of the government- and I fear the current proposed bill, is in fact, has far more significant potential to cause issues for the environments than initially intended. Without first developing well-researched alternatives, the push away from plastic products is harmful.

Lastly, inadequate waste management systems is a problem in Australia. Our sorting of plastic waste at the waste management plants could be a better improvement and/or alternative solution. Currently, the plastic recycling programs are gaining some merit in urban NSW communities; however, our facilities are not equipped to process and sort plastic waste if the waste originated in the general waste (red bins). Rather than push and utilise resources for a plastic bag ban, more resources and emphasis to make our waste facility plants world-class at recycling. The problem of plastic bags entering our oceans is unacceptable. More robust programs and innovative solutions (e.g. clear bins now placed in Railway Stations such as central station) provides a better solution of using the Australian government limited funds to address the root cause of the issue: the problem with littering and excessive waste. The push to ban plastic agenda without close consultation and collaboration with the plastic industry is an opportunity lost.

Rather than work against the plastic bag industry, I believe a more measured approach that takes into account our history, develop well-resourced alternatives that does not increase the risk of deforestation, better waste management/population education is required. Enabling the environment for the plastic industry to survive and in fact, I see working together to create incentives for our industry to innovate and invent new products that cause less impact of the environment as a better way forward than the proposed Product Stewardship Amendment (Packaging and Plastics) Bill 2019.

Thank you for taking the time to consider this letter. We look forward to hearing back from you.

Regards,

Gabriel Cheung

Project Manager

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Reference:

¹ World Bank (2009) Climate 101 Deforestation. Accessed via

<http://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/five-forest-figures-international-day-forests> Date: 9/10/2019