Australian Senate – Inquiry into the Management of Australia's Waste Streams

This submission is made by Port Stephens Council to the Australian Senate, Environment, Communications and the Arts Committee, in relation to the Inquiry into the Management of Australia's Waste Streams.

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Approved by Council on - 22/4/08, Council minute - 097

Introduction

Port Stephens Council (NSW) manages the domestic waste for the residents of Port Stephens. The residents of Port Stephens currently have one 240 litre garbage bin and one 240 litre co-mingled recycling bin per household. Residents are able to pay for additional bin services.

The recyclables are currently processed at a privately owned Materials Recycling Facility, while the residual household waste is processed at the Bedminster Composting Plant in Raymond Terrace (NSW).

As Council is primarily concerned about the management of domestic waste, the following comments are mostly in relation to this waste stream.

a. Trends in Waste Production in Australia

Over the last three years waste generation within the Port Stephens Council area has remained steady at approximately 27,000 tonnes per year. This equates to approximately 427kg of waste generated per person, per year.

Of this waste, approximately 19% are co-mingled recyclables processed at a Materials Recycling Facility. The remaining 81% is processed into compost at the Bedminster Composting plant (alternative waste technology plant). Overall we divert approximately 60% of domestic waste from landfill.

b. Effectiveness of existing strategies to reduce, recover and reuse waste from different waste streams

Port Stephens Council measures the effectiveness of its strategies through waste data collected at weighbridges and through feedback from the community via its community satisfaction surveys.

The waste data demonstrates that Port Stephens Council's waste minimisation strategies have been very effective in reducing waste to landfill. From previously land filling 100% of its waste, waste to landfill was reduced to 37% over the two year period between 05/06 and 06/07.

In Port Stephens Council's customer satisfaction survey December 2007, its waste services were rated as 'a strength of the Council, with community members identifying it as both important and performing better than the (other services)'.

c. Potential new strategies to reduce, recover and reuse waste from different waste streams

Port Stephens Council's waste minimisation strategies have historically been in the form of providing infrastructure and/or services for residents and following up with education to promote the service eg household recycling bins. Education is effective for that section of the community that is interested in the environment and that have the will to change their behaviours. A mix of approaches, is needed to engage the remainder of the community and therefore further reduce the quantity of waste going to landfill for example regulation and economic incentives.

Regulation and/or economic incentives have the potential to maximise the effectiveness of existing infrastructure and services provided, and also increase the community's rate of waste avoidance, one example of this is the regulation of the use of single use plastic bags. Some other examples of where this can be applied follow:

- The recent trend in NSW is to use an alternative waste technology plant to process residual waste into compost. It would therefore be in the interest of a lot of Council's to maximise the percentage of waste that is biodegradable. Regulations and/or economic incentives (eg business tax benefits) could be used to phase-out non-biodegradable and non-recyclable waste items eg plastic packaging and replace these with an organic / fibre based product.

- A differential waste levy could be applied in the Sydney Regulated Area and the Extended Regulated Area (Hunter, Illawarra and Blue Mountains areas), based upon the environmental risk profile of the waste type.

- A differential waste levy could also be applied to loads received at waste transfer stations that have the waste types pre-sorted to facilitate recovery.

d. The economic, environmental and social benefits and costs of such strategies

No comment

e. Policy priorities to maximise the efficiency and efficacy of efforts to reduce, recover and reuse waste from different waste streams

The waste industry currently operates at the end of the manufacturing and production industries. Future priorities should focus on moving the influence of the industry from simply the collection and processing of waste, to the redesign of products to make them less toxic, more bio-degradable and more recyclable. This will move the industry so that it is operating in the higher order of the waste hierarchy, in that area of waste avoidance.

f. Consideration of the Drink Container Recycling Bill 2008.

Port Stephens Council supports the introduction of the Beverage / Drink Container Recycling Bill 2008. It also supports the use of the waste hierarchy within the Bill to require producers of drink containers to minimise the environmental impacts of producing beverage containers and redesign them to improve their reusability or recyclability.