

21 May 2008

Mr Stephen Palethorpe
Inquiry Secretary
The Senate Standing Committee on Environment,
Communications and the Arts
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Sir,

Submission on the Management of Australia's waste streams and the Drink Container Recycling Bill

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on waste generation and management in Australia and the proposed Drink Container Recycling Bill. My comments relate particularly to unwanted manufactured products and packaging (and not organic waste).

I have been involved in community groups working to reduce waste for the past 17 years: as President of the Worldwide Home Environmentalists' Network (WHEN) Australia, then as the Zero Waste Campaign Director of Environment Victoria and currently as a consultant with my own business, Upstream Advice.

Since the introduction of kerbside recycling systems for paper and certain packaging by local governments in Australia, no effective schemes have been put in place to reduce waste and increase recycling of waste products arising from other than this limited range of products consumed at home. That is not to say that there has not been significant effort put into research, strategising and target setting, education and voluntary experimentation with other waste streams, but all of this activity has not slowed the amount of waste being generated and, if organic waste is taken out of the equation, has not resulted in a sustained improvement in recycling rates. What is needed now is well-designed and targeted interventions by governments with the aim of moving towards a sustainable economy where the design and use of products occurs in a cyclical system where pollution and litter are avoided and embodied energy and materials are not lost.

Waste streams that require national, mandated approaches, based on extended producer responsibility principles, are:

- packaging
- electronic waste (computers, TVs, mobile phones etc)
- tyres
- fluorescent lighting devises
- paint
- treated timber
- waste oil
- batteries

- gas bottles
- plastic bags

The voluntary and partial nature with which these waste streams are currently being addressed results in consumer confusion and disempowerment. This, in turn, leads to significant amounts of waste that should be recycled going to landfill, including recyclables that have been contaminated and rendered worthless. The problems arise mainly due to the lack of system solutions such as producer responsibility take-back schemes that explicitly include, and motivate the consumer to take part, in the return systems. Local governments should not be expected to pick up, sort and clean up their communities' growing mountains of rapidly obsolescent products. Neither should they be left with the liability of landfills which contain (and can emit) the toxic elements embodied in products such as ewaste, paint, batteries, treated timber and fluorescent lighting.

The roles and responsibilities of the producer and consumer in a sustainable economy must be made clear by governments. They need to set standards and introduce national, market-based mechanisms to provide financial incentives for changed behaviour and to raise revenue from those who create the waste to recover and recycle it. Such incentives, which should be introduced in Australia, include:

- Deposit–refund systems for packaging waste (containers), mobile phones, gas bottles and car batteries;
- Advance recycling fees for computer equipment and TVs; and
- Levies on discretionary items such as plastic bags

Other products such as tyres, where the major change-over agents are in the commercial realm, or fluorescent lighting, where toxic emissions are inevitable, should be banned from landfill so that recycling opportunities are utilised.

For many of the problematic wastes listed above there are policy solutions already available. In many cases, such as TVs, tyres and fluorescent lighting, Australian businesses are ready and able to proceed with take-back and recycling schemes. All that is required is for Governments to ensure that the schemes are monitored for effectiveness in terms of the standards set and to penalise any businesses that are not participating and therefore gaining an unfair advantage.

While the policy solution to reducing the adverse impact on the environment of each of the above products may be different, the systems for return and recycling may overlap, resulting in greater efficiencies in the system.

Drink Container Recycling Bill

I support the Bill as an effective mechanism for reducing and recovering packaging waste and appropriately redistributing responsibility for this waste to producers.

As demonstrated in South Australia, container deposit systems complement and improve kerbside systems by:

- Motivating consumers to put packaging consumed away from home (estimated to be 50% of all packaging) into a return and recycling stream, rather than discarding it in street and office bins or dumping it as litter;

- Allowing councils to collect the unredeemed deposits on containers left at kerbside thus receiving compensation for the collection system from consumers who use the products;
- Generating cleaner, less contaminated streams of recyclables that attract better prices for councils and contractors. For example, under a container deposit system consumers tend to separate glass containers (on which a deposit has been paid) out of kerbside collections, so that valuable paper and newsprint is not contaminated by broken glass.
- Allowing greater compaction of recyclables in collection trucks (without the threat of breaking glass) so that the trucks can increase the tonnage collected in any one run thus decreasing the cost of collections.
- Encouraging the voluntary and non-government sector to become involved in litter and container collection (due to the fund-raising potential of unredeemed deposits).

The voluntary National Packaging Covenant (NPC) is powerless to influence recycling outcomes and should be scrapped in favour of a container deposit system. Recently the NPC has been found guilty of misinterpreting statistics and inflating recycling rates and exaggerating its influence, which is negligible when compared to the diligence of local government and the price of recyclables. Even in the important area of packaging design, which is within the power of business to change, there is not a discernable shift to more recyclable packaging and better labelling for recycling. This is because there is no financial incentive for businesses to change in this direction.

If the cost of recycling were more equitably shared between producer and consumer, via a deposit-refund system, then better recycling outcomes could be achieved without subsidising the creation of waste through increases in council rates. Container deposit systems are not about what it costs to recover resources but about how and where to levy the costs that already exist.

As shown by surveys in South Australia and newspolls in other states, the public is generally supportive of container deposit systems. They are easy to understand and their effect of reducing litter is appreciated.

I wish you well in your deliberations.

Yours sincerely

Jenny Henty
Upstream Advice