



Submission to the Australian Senate Committee for the Environment, Communications,
Technology and the Arts

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PLASTIC BAG LEVY (ASSESSMENT AND COLLECTION) BILL 2002

PLASTIC BAG (MINIMISATION OF USAGE) EDUCATION FUND BILL 2002

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1. CLEAN UP AUSTRALIA'S POSITION ON THE PLASTIC BAG ISSUE

Clean Up Australia aims to:

- Inspire and encourage all Australians to Clean Up, Fix Up and conserve their environment.
- Inform Australians of simple behavioural changes they can make to minimise their impact on the environment.

Clean Up's primary focus in the plastic bag issue is to reduce the number of plastic bags in the environment by encouraging retailers and the community to refuse, reduce, reuse and recycle plastic bags.

Clean Up Australia considers the following plastic bag issues are key areas of concern:

1. General environmental effects of plastic bag litter.
2. Effects of plastic bag litter on wildlife and marine life.
3. Sending recyclable plastic bags to landfill.
4. Excessive use of plastic bags.

Clean Up Australia identified the need to reduce bag use by at least 50%, increase recycling to 50% and significantly reduce plastic bag litter. Since 2001, this has translated into an active and collaborative campaign for behavioural change. These targets were reinforced when the Environment Protection and Heritage Council (EPHC) nominated them as targets to be met by the end of 2004.

To date, campaigning has been delivered through the **Bag Yourself a Better Environment** campaign - a call for voluntary efforts by retailers and customers to reduce the number of plastic bags in the environment and waste stream by:

- Refusing plastic bags whenever possible
- Reducing plastic bag use by using alternatives, and
- Increasing plastic bag recycling by identifying the need for retailers to provide plastic bag recycling in-store.

The campaign was developed and implemented by **Clean Up Australia** in partnership with the Commonwealth Government's Environment Australia, Coles, Bi-Lo, Woolworths and Safeway supermarkets, the Australian Retailers Association, local councils, schools and members of the community.



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Clean Up Australia advocates collaborative solutions, whereby the good of the environment and the interests of the community are considered equally.

As a first option, **Clean Up Australia** would be disappointed to see the introduction of a levy as a means of changing Australians' use and disposal of plastic bags.

The reasons for this are:

1.1. INDIVIDUAL ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP AND CORPORATE CITIZENSHIP

Imposition of a levy is not guaranteed to engender sustained behavioural change by shoppers, or to remove plastic bags from the environment. If retailers do not commit to changing checkout practice and catering graciously to users of alternatives, people may choose to pay to use plastic bags rather than suffer the discomfort of checkout scorn.

It is imperative that shoppers with alternatives to plastic bags are served with the same courtesy and efficiency given to users of plastic bags. Training and education of staff to use alternatives must be undertaken with the same thoroughness as other profit-driven skill sets. Allowances for the acknowledged slower processing of alternatives must also be made.

There is also a possibility that the knowledge that the money is going to 'the environment' in the form of a fund will abrogate shopper and retailer responsibility and act as a justification for their use.

1.2. EFFECTS ON SMALL BUSINESS

Retailer administered taxes hit small business hard by creating additional time-consuming administration tasks.

1.3. EFFECTS ON LOW INCOME EARNERS

Fixed taxes, like the proposed levy, affect low-income earners by consuming more of their net income.

1.4. THE PERCEIVED VALUE OF PLASTIC BAGS AS A RESOURCE

There is no guarantee that applying a dollar value to non-refundable plastic bags will make Australians treat them as a recyclable resource. **Clean Up**



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Australia is concerned that a 'user-pays' system could create an even more careless attitude to the use and disposal of plastic bags.

1.5. SUSTAINED BEHAVIOURAL CHANGE

While Ireland's Plastax has been successful in reducing use of plastic bags, it has only been in operation for a year. There is no evidence that this reduction in use will be sustained once people are accustomed to paying for bags.

1.6. PRECEDENT

The plastic bag issue is the first environmentally motivated packaging issue to capture public interest on a mass scale. The way that the plastic bag issue is addressed will set a precedent for the way other environmentally driven issues are dealt with in the future.

This issue will set a precedent for retailers as corporate citizens. It will show how willing they are to make decisions considering holistic view of business, community and environmental imperatives.

This issue will also set a precedent for shoppers. It will prove how far government and other stakeholders can reasonably expect to collaborate with retailers before having to rely on government intervention to force retailers to take the actions that the community requires of them as corporate citizens.

1.7. PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS ABOUT A LEVY

On the strength of the almost immediate effects of the Irish levy, Australians have been quick to embrace the idea. The possibility of a collaborative solution has not received due consideration. In light of the precedents that this issue will set, **Clean Up Australia** believes it is imperative that Government foster corporate citizenship by giving all stakeholders every encouragement and incentive to collaborate on a solution that will remove plastic bags from the environment and meet Ministerial targets before resorting to mandatory measures.

The opinions of the Australian community were researched in a Newspoll survey conducted during **Bag Yourself a Better Environment 2003**. The survey revealed that:

- 98% of respondents were aware of, and concerned about, the effects of plastic bags on the environment and wildlife.



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- 52.7% were likely to refuse plastic bags offered to them.
- 39.8% were likely to use alternatives such as calico bags.
- 44.7% were likely to recycle bags at a recycling facility.

The community is clearly aware of the environmental effects of plastic bags, and has indicated willingness to change behaviour. Successful implementation of agreeable solutions to this issue will demand collaboration, co-operation and innovation by environmental groups, business, industry, government and the community at large.

The **Bag Yourself a Better Environment** campaign has shown in a small way that a communication and voluntary action campaign can reduce bag use and increase recycling. Replicated on a much broader scale this type of campaign can achieve our aim to reduce the number of plastic bags in the environment by encouraging retailers and the community to refuse, reduce, reuse and recycle plastic bags.

2. IDENTIFICATION AND DISCUSSION OF RELEVANT ISSUES

The plastic bag issue is urgent for the following reasons:

2.1 LITTER

Plastic bag litter is highly visible, long-lasting and highly mobile, making it difficult and expensive to collect.

2.2 HARM TO WILDLIFE AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Plastic bags are known to harm wildlife and pollute waterways. Active campaigning by various environmental groups has made this common knowledge as shown by Newspoll.

2.3 WASTE TO LANDFILL

Sending recyclable plastic bags to landfill is resource inefficient and may contribute to passive littering via landfill blow off. The most resource efficient solution is to keep plastic bags out of landfill and in the resource loop via recycling facilities provided at supermarkets nationally. Despite recent media regarding the availability of alternatives and recycling facilities, Newspoll



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showed that 27.4% of shoppers still put plastic bags straight into the rubbish after bringing them home.

One of the most common reasons given for accepting plastic bags is that people reuse them as bin liners, which is often perceived as recycling. People need to understand that sending a recyclable resource to landfill is not recycling - it is a single reuse.

If a levy were to be introduced, the supply of perceived 'free' bin liners would be drastically reduced and alternatives would be needed. **Clean Up Australia** would strongly encourage the introduction of rigorously tested compostable garbage bags and bin liners.

There is widespread public perception that biodegradable, degradable and compostable bags are a perfect alternative to plastic bags currently used. However, the use of biodegradable plastic bags in a retail setting must be treated with caution. The primary solution to the problem is to reduce the overall number of bags used, not to use the same number of biodegradables. Nor are they a single solution to the key issues of litter and environmental harm in the short term. They currently only degrade under ideal conditions and a considerable period of time (months to years) is still needed for complete degradation.

Finally, preventing contamination of the plastics recycling stream with degradable plastic bags is a significant issue that must be addressed irrespective of any further actions.

2.4 MINISTERIAL TARGETS

In December 2002, The Environment Protection and Heritage Council (EPHC) set down strict targets to be met by the end of 2004. The targets were a reduction of current bag use by 50%; an increase in recycling to 50%; and a reduction in plastic bag litter by 75%. **Clean Up Australia** believes that these targets are environmentally sound and absolutely achievable through collaborative solutions from all stakeholders.

2.5 CONSUMER WILLINGNESS TO CHANGE

Newspoll showed that 93% of respondents believed that shoppers are responsible for implementing change. 85% said that retailers were also responsible. This change can only occur if retailers accept that alternatives



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are the next generation of packaging and take steps to service users of them well.

Interestingly, various levels of government were considered responsible by 59% to 69% of respondents. This lower level of expectation indicates both a sense of responsibility from shoppers and an expectation that retailers will contribute to a solution.

These findings are at odds with information often quoted in the media that suggest 78% of Australians support a levy as a solution to the problem.

3. IDENTIFICATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF COLLABORATIVE SOLUTIONS

As outlined earlier, **Clean Up Australia** agrees that the changes demanded by environmental groups and shoppers are not being met fast enough. Whichever way the issue is finally resolved, **Clean Up Australia** proposes the introduction of a simple five-step collaborative approach that will:

- Remove plastic bags from the environment.
- Allow all stakeholders to achieve targets set down by the EPHC by the end of 2004.
- Provide a valuable blueprint for future collaborations between government, manufacturers, retailers, environmental groups and the community on other packaging issues.

STEP ONE

Form a stakeholders group (representing government, manufacturers, retailers, environmental groups, researchers and the community) with a common commitment to implementing collaborative solutions based on corporate citizenship.

While all these groups exist in isolation (eg The Australian Retailers Association, the EPHC and National Packaging Covenant Council, **Bag Yourself a Better Environment**), there is no forum that facilitates publicly accountable collaborative decision-making.

Group members must agree to:



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- a. Openly discuss opportunities and threats posed to all stakeholders by the plastic bag issue.
- b. Devise broad solutions to address these opportunities and threats.
- c. Commit to implement broad solutions within a given timeframe.
- d. Be publicly accountable for implementation of agreed solutions, to be externally audited.

STEP TWO

Stakeholders must negotiate specific methods to implement the solutions within their organisations. The goal of implementation is to achieve EPHC targets by the end of 2004. Specific methods must:

- a. Address community concerns regarding the environmental effects of plastic bags and allow individuals to take action by using alternatives to plastic bags.
- b. Retailers must address these concerns by:
 - Providing alternatives to plastic bags.
 - Internally and externally publicising the availability of alternatives and recycling.
 - Altering retail practice to welcome shoppers using alternatives.
 - Implementing these changes within all retail outlets under their control.
- c. Acknowledge that this is a benchmark case, the results of which will set a precedent for future environmental solutions to be either collaborative or adversarial.
- d. Provide the greatest benefit for the greatest number of Australians while being mindful of their impact on future.
- e. Allocate responsibility for identified areas to specific stakeholders, in particular, development of a national standard for biodegradable bags.



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STEP THREE

Stakeholders must create a communication campaign, the key messages of which will be suitable for uniform presentation across mainstream media, workplace information and educational targets. The messages are to be:

- a. Simple.
- b. Easily repeated.
- c. Suitable for multiple mediums listed above.
- d. Transparent and able to be “cascaded” from the top to the bottom of stakeholder groups without losing meaning.

STEP FOUR

Stakeholders in this mass communication and change exercise must agree to uniform delivery of the message, and to deliver it to as many Australians as possible, using all resources available to them.

Effective communication is a critical component in removing plastic bags from the environment, whether a levy is introduced or not.

STEP FIVE

Review and learn.

- a. Were EPHC targets met?
- b. Were strengths and weaknesses effectively addressed?
- c. Were the broad solutions effective?
- d. Were the specific solutions effective?
- e. Were timeframes workable?
- f. Was internal communication effective?
- g. Was marketing communication effective?
- h. What were the key success factors identified?



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4. CONCLUSION IN SUPPORT OF A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH AS A FIRST SOLUTION TO THE PLASTIC BAG PROBLEM

All stakeholders have a responsibility to take considered action on this issue. Avoiding shouldering responsibility by allowing government alone to address the issue will set a dangerous precedent for low corporate accountability, and refusal of business to meet the needs of the community when there is not an immediate monetary benefit at stake.

Low corporate accountability has created this problem at great cost to Australia's environment. The plastic bag problem is one that our environment can no longer afford to bear, and the community is calling for fast solutions. The problem demands thorough and immediate accountability and decisions on a clear and accountable course of action from all stakeholders.

However, Clean Up Australia also recognises that if retailer and consumer behaviour does not change the imposition of a mandatory regulation by either levy or ban would be our next step to resolve the issue.

If a levy was implemented Clean up Australia would strongly advocate the funds raised from its collection must be invested in environmental programs devoted to inspiring and encouraging all Australians to refuse, reduce, reuse, recycle plastic bags as well as sharing the responsibility to clean up and fix up environments already damaged by plastic bags. The fund should also invest in activities that show Australian's how through simple behavioural change they can help protect our land, waterways and their wildlife inhabitants.