

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 On 18 June 2015 the Senate referred the following matter for inquiry and report by 8 April 2016:

The threat of marine plastic pollution in Australia and Australian waters, with particular reference to:

- (a) the review of current research and scientific understanding of plastic pollution in the marine environment;
- (b) sources of marine plastic pollution;
- (c) the impacts of marine plastic pollution, including impacts on species and ecosystems, fisheries, small business, and human health;
- (d) measures and resourcing for mitigation; and
- (e) any other relevant matters.

1.2 The reporting date was extended to 18 April 2016 and subsequently extended to 20 April 2016.¹

Conduct of the inquiry

1.3 The committee advertised the inquiry on its website and in *The Australian* newspaper. The committee also wrote to relevant organisations and individuals inviting written submissions.

1.4 The committee received 193 submissions, which are listed at Appendix 1. The committee also received 527 copies of form letter 1; 174 copies of form letter 2, and 50 short statements accepted as correspondence. The committee held public hearings for this inquiry in Sydney on 18 February 2016, Canberra on 26 February 2016 and 31 March 2016 and Brisbane on 10 March 2016. A list of witnesses who appeared at the hearings may be found at Appendix 2.

Acknowledgement

1.5 The committee would like to thank the organisations and individuals who provided evidence to the inquiry. Many of the submissions received contained in-depth analysis of the issues and extensively referenced research articles. These submissions greatly assisted the committee in its deliberations on the issues raised.

1.6 Other submissions provided photographs and information on programs to clean-up marine debris in areas across Australia. This evidence presented the

1 *Journals of the Senate*, 2013–16, No. 149, (18 April 2016), p. 4095.

committee with not only graphic evidence of the extent of marine pollution and its effects but also the level of commitment of many individuals and groups who spend thousands of hours cleaning up Australia's coastal environments.

1.7 Submissions also provided evidence of the contribution of individuals and groups in identifying and implementing solutions to lessen the impact of marine plastic pollution—this included suggesting to bait companies to use zip lock bags so that recreational fishers were more likely to take bait home after a day's fishing rather than discarding it in the water, to engaging with local schools to build awareness of the need to properly dispose of litter, and encouraging local businesses to change their packaging.

Structure of the report

1.8 This report comprises 8 chapters. The matters covered in the remaining chapters of the report are outlined below:

- Chapter 2 provides an overview of marine plastic pollution including magnitude, sources and types, and also examines recent estimates of the cost of plastic pollution;
- Chapter 3 examines the impacts of marine plastic pollution on marine fauna, fisheries, ecosystems as well as human health; and
- Chapter 4 examines the mechanisms available to the Australian Government to address marine plastic pollution as well as concerns about the lack of a coordinated approach to policy development and implementation.

1.9 The remaining chapters of the report examine mechanisms to address marine plastic pollution in the two key areas of removal and prevention through source reduction as follows:

- Chapter 5 examines the scope and effectiveness of current strategies to remove marine plastic pollution;
- Chapter 6 explores source reduction through changes in consumer behaviour, and infrastructure;
- Chapter 7 explores source reduction through improvements in product stewardship, regulatory and legislative changes, and enforcement activities; and
- Chapter 8 provides the committee's conclusions and recommendations.

Previous inquiries

1.10 The committee acknowledges the significant work undertaken by previous iterations of the Environment and Communications Committee in undertaking inquiries into the implementation and management of container deposit schemes.²

1.11 These inquiries received evidence both in support of, and in opposition to, container deposit schemes. The committees found that there was generally evidence to support the claim that the schemes reduced litter in the environment. However, there were concerns raised regarding potential associated costs of operation both to manufacturers, retailers, and consumers. There was also a lack of consensus on an appropriate model for implementation.

1.12 For this inquiry, the committee chose to consider container deposit schemes in the context of identifying mitigation strategies to counter the threat to the marine environment from single-use consumer products.

1.13 In addition, the Environment and Communications References Committee tabled its report on the inquiry into stormwater management in Australia in December 2015.³ This report canvassed a number of issues directly related to the stormwater infrastructure which is a key mechanism to preventing litter, including plastics, from entering the marine environment.

Note on references

1.14 All references in this report to the Committee Hansard are to the proof version of the transcript. Page numbers may vary between the proof and the official Hansard transcript.

2 See Senate Environment and Communications References Committee, *Operation of the South Australian and Northern Territory container deposit schemes*, November 2012; Senate Environment, Communications and the Arts Legislation Committee, *Environment Protection (Beverage Container Deposit and Recovery Scheme) Bill 2009*, September 2009; and Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communications and the Arts, *Management of Australia's waste streams (including consideration of the Container Recycling Bill 2008)*, September 2008.

3 Senate Environment and Communications References Committee, *Stormwater management in Australia*, December 2015.

