

## **INQUIRY INTO PLASTIC POLLUTION IN AUSTRALIA'S OCEANS AND WATERWAYS.**

No Balloon Release Australia (NBRA) lobbies and petitions state, territory and federal governments for a national ban on the release of balloons, and national regulation on the sale and use of helium for inflating balloons, to stop releases at the source.



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## **INQUIRY INTO PLASTIC POLLUTION IN AUSTRALIA'S OCEANS AND WATERWAYS.**

PLEASE NOTE: This submission on plastic pollution is specifically about balloons.

Latex balloons are considered single use plastic as, due to added chemicals, they do not biodegrade and cannot be recycled.

<https://www.imas.utas.edu.au/news/news-items/new-study-finds-latex-balloons-are-not-biodegradable>

Mylar/foil balloons are made from plastic and break up into micro and nano plastics.

### **TERMS OF REFERENCE**

- **the environmental impacts of plastic pollution particularly in oceans and waterways**

There are two major impacts from balloons, in particular released helium balloons: marine debris and harm to wildlife.

**Marine Debris:** Released helium balloons can travel hundreds of kilometres, ending up as litter, somewhere.

Balloons released in western Sydney were found three weeks later at Lord Howe Island, (800 kms)



Balloons released in Albury were found the next day at Bermagui (300 kms).

There are many other examples where balloons have been identified, with their release location and collection locations to show the distances released balloons can travel.

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-09-19/balloons-found-out-to-sea-threatening-marine-life/10265058>



The Australian Marine Debris Initiative Database estimates 25,777 balloons, clips, ribbons and accessories were collected from subject beaches in the five years from 01/01/2017 (see attached petition information for map).

8 balloons collected from 1 kilometre stretch of national park beach in 5 weeks with no stormwater or open waterways.



**Harm to wildlife:** Balloons can kill or injure marine wildlife. Wildlife such as turtles, shearwaters and petrels mistake balloons as food, which then blocks their digestive tract. They die slow deaths from starvation. Other wildlife such as shorebirds, albatross and penguins become entangled in the ribbons, which prevents their flight and feeding, again causing death from starvation. NBRA has also received reports of platypus, magpies and satin bower birds dying the same way. The hard plastic balloon clips also cause problems such as choking, and break up into micro and nano plastics which impact on internal organs. The ribbons and clips can cause damage to internal organs, also eventually causing death.

As well as anecdotal evidence from wildlife carers and marine debris collectors, there is a great deal of research into the impact of balloons on marine wildlife, such as

<https://phys.org/news/2019-03-balloons-marine-debris-mortality-seabirds.html?fbclid=IwAR3RWxGtCTu1lw1leCEFRUDAJeIuBpbvoq2rcX3E4bFQMRQ0DFjpXHtKAx4>

<https://www.wur.nl/en/article/4.-How-many-animals-die-because-of-balloons.htm>

<https://www.acap.aq/search14?q=balloons>



- **the effectiveness of Australia's plastics management framework under the National Plastics Plan and related policies to reduce plastic pollution particularly in oceans and waterways**

The National Plastics Plan has had no effect on reducing the environmental impact of balloons. It has the potential to, as it aims to address the plastic problem at the source, which regulating access to helium would do.

Federal legislation to regulate the sale of helium to prevent the release of helium balloons could be considered under the *Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* which in 2003 had this listing added: threatening process, injury and fatality to vertebrate marine life caused by ingestion of, or entanglement in, harmful marine debris.

*The Threat Abatement Plan for the impacts of marine debris on the vertebrate wildlife of Australia's coasts and oceans (2018)* mentions balloons but no action has resulted.

It "provides for a co-ordinated national approach to the implementation of measures to prevent and mitigate the impacts of harmful marine debris on vertebrate marine life. The plan complements actions to address litter at its source by reducing waste, increasing recycling and building industry partnerships." Department of the Environment and Energy reference PDR:MC17-014052. Regulating the sale of helium to prevent it being used to inflate balloons would stop balloon releases at the source.

No action was taken by the previous government. However, previous Assistant Minister Evans said "The Morrison Government takes the issue of marine debris and its impacts on the environment and wildlife very seriously. That is why we are working with the states and territories to reduce litter and other wastes, **including from balloons**, to reduce their impact on the environment". (Their ref: MC20-004381, my emphasis).

The Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment recognised that balloons are considered single use plastic and problematic when not disposed of properly (their ref: MC21-039327). Although releasing balloons is not proper disposal, there has been no action.

- **the effectiveness of the Australian Government's engagement with states, territories, industry and non-government organisations to reduce plastic pollution particularly in oceans and waterways**

Despite many requests since 2016, no national action has been taken to ban the release of balloons, nor to regulate the sale and use of helium to inflate balloons, to stop releases at the source. Not once has a Meeting of Environment Ministers responded to NBRA emails requesting they unite for national action.

Lobbying by NBRA and many other individuals and groups has resulted in Western Australia banning the release of balloons in its plastics policy, and the Northern Territory plans to ban helium balloons in 2025. Queensland (since 2011), Victoria and Tasmania recognise releasing balloons as littering but releases, both accidental and deliberate, still occur because helium is widely available.

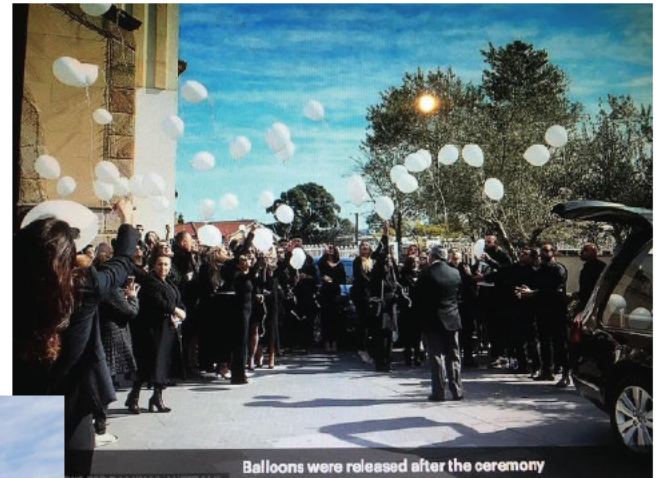
We have been unsuccessful with New South Wales and Australian Capital Territory which both still allow up to 19 balloons to be released, even though every single balloon will come back to Earth as litter and threaten wildlife, and the NSW EPA recognises the impact of balloons.

<https://www.epa.nsw.gov.au/your-environment/litter-and-illegal-dumping/epa-work-prevent-litter/balloon-litter>





This mass release of 14 balloons was legal in NSW (neither Premier Perrottet nor then Prime Minister Morrison responded)



These bigger mass releases were illegal but no action was taken.



*If helium was not readily available, balloon releases could not occur.*

South Australia says the Litter Act is enough but local government does not have the resources to follow up. Councils have unsuccessfully asked for state legislation.

In all cases, prosecution for illegal balloon releases rarely occurs, as councils do not have the resources. Often the releases occur in tragic circumstances, and councils are reluctant to prosecute grieving family and friends. After the event is too late, as the damage has been done.

The Australian Government has not engaged substantially with No Balloon Release Australia, other than an occasional letter, a phone call with an advisor to previous Assistant Minister Evans earlier this year and a meeting with an advisor to then Environment Minister Frydenberg. The advisor put us in touch with the panel working on the marine debris TAP, but after initial contact, emails were not answered.

Since Labor's election, NBRA has sent 16 emails to all Environment Ministers, and Minister Plibersek has not answered. A response to Petition EN 4351 presented in November is eagerly awaited.

Australia's plastics management framework under the National Plastics Plan and related policies has failed to take action to reduce the environmental impact from released helium balloons.

- **global initiatives underway to reduce plastic pollution particularly in oceans and waterways,**

Seychelles bans balloons outright.

Many states in the USA and many counties in UK ban the release of balloons, as do many municipalities in the Netherlands. However releases, both accidental and deliberate, still occur because helium is widely available and councils do not enforce laws.

A USA group, Balloons Blow, has had major successes in stopping mass balloon releases eg at Indianapolis 500.

There are a number of groups such as NBRA internationally on social media, all advocating to protect wildlife and oceans from released helium balloons.

The International Treaty on Plastic Pollution: if Australia took action on balloons, these aspects would be covered:

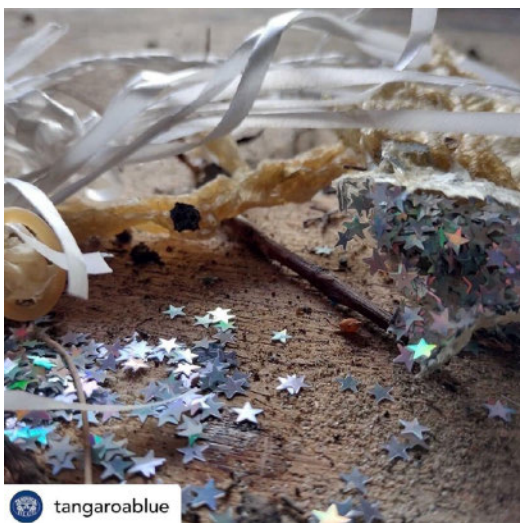
- control measures to reduce demand for plastic
- eliminate problematic plastics
- address hazardous chemicals (the chemical makeup of balloons is largely unknown).
- provision for waste minimisation and waste avoidance
- use best available science.

- **any other relevant matter.**

1. The NSW EPA recently released the *Marine Debris Threat And Risk Assessment* (<https://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/-/media/OEH/Corporate-Site/Documents/Water/Coasts/Research/marine-debris-threat-and-risk-assessment-summary-report-220447.pdf>)

which found

- \* Balloons are among the top 12 littered items.
- \* Balloons are listed as a STATEWIDE priority threat for the marine estate.
- \* *Entanglement and ingestion* are the impacts of debris that pose the highest risk level to fauna and impact the most environmental assets



2. The number and variety of balloons has increased dramatically in recent times, yet the balloon industry is unregulated. Stores still advertise “100% biodegradable balloons” even when the balloon has a metallic coating and contains plastic confetti such as this one found on a Queensland beach which could’ve easily polluted the ocean:

<https://www.bigw.com.au/product/artwrap-star-glitter-confetti-balloon-rose-gold/p/696922>

3. Over the time NBRA has been active, supporters have sent in examples of accidental and deliberate balloon releases, wildlife affected by balloons and balloon marine debris. When there is a planned balloon release, organisers have been contacted with education but often the release occurs anyway. The evidence is incontrovertible: action is needed to stop balloon releases at the source by regulating the sale of helium so it cannot be used to inflate balloons.

4. Please find attached information relating to Petition EN 4351 presented to the House of Representatives in November 2022 by Kristy McBain, MP and Minister for Regional Development. This was sent to all environment ministers, and lists other reasons for regulating the sale of helium such as reducing deaths and suicide from inhaling helium, and conserving the scarce, hard to process gas for important uses in science, medicine and industry.

#### ABOUT NBRA.

No Balloon Release Australia was formed in 2016 to promote a petition to the Federal Government to ban the release of balloons and the sale and use of helium to inflate balloons.

It came about when, already aware that balloons cause environmental harm (informed by the late Lance Ferris, founder of Australian Seabird Rescue in late 1990's), I noticed an increasing number of balloons on my local beach, including the bunch that had travelled from Albury overnight.

Through Tangaroa Blue Foundation, I was put in contact with two other women, Lisa Hills in Western Australia and Amy Motherwell in Victoria who were also campaigning for balloon action and helped promote the then paper petition.

At the time, the campaign for action on single use plastics did not include balloons, an obvious omission given the evidence that balloons cause environmental harm.

Tangaroa Blue Foundation, Australian Platypus Conservancy, Zoos Victoria and Australian Seabird and Turtle Rescue Inc, Central Coast and South Coast have supported NBRA throughout. Since the states and territories have started to take action on SUPs, other environmental groups supporting NBRA including Clean Up Australia, Take 3 for the Sea, Plastic Free July, Australian Marine Conservation Society, Boomerang Alliance, World Wildlife Fund Australia, Surfrider Foundation, Sea Shepherd Australia Marine Debris Campaign.

NBRA is active on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.







The petition is in two parts:

### **1. Nationally prohibit the release of any number of helium filled balloons**

- \* Many local government areas have bans in place but the bans only apply to land they manage.
- \* Currently Western Australia is the only state to ban the release of balloons in its plastics plan. Queensland, Victoria, and Tasmania consider the release of balloons to be littering. South Australia does little, and New South Wales and Australian Capital Territory actually allow the release of up to 19 balloons.
- \* Northern Territory is going to ban helium balloons, an excellent move which likely needs Federal support, and leads to the second part of the petition.

### **2. Nationally regulate the sale and use of helium to inflate balloons to stop releases at the source**

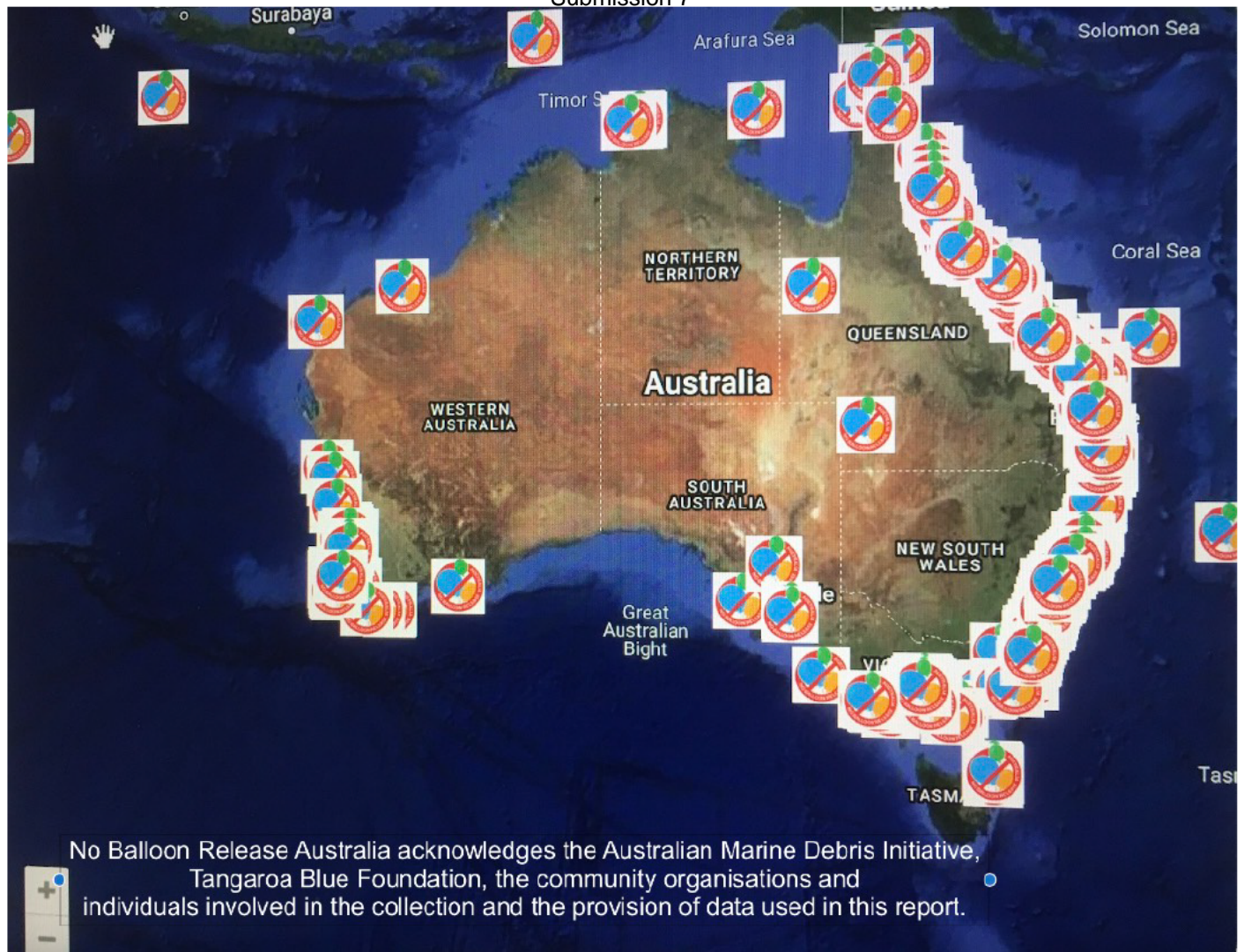
- \* Released helium filled balloons cause environmental harm, including to marine wildlife in the waterways and oceans of Australia.
- \* The NSW EPA's Marine Debris Threat and Risk Assessment report found balloons are among the top 12 littered items, listed balloons as a statewide priority threat for the marine estate, and that *entanglement and ingestion* are the impacts of debris that pose the highest risk level to fauna and impact the most environmental assets
- \* Wildlife are known to die or be injured when mistaking balloons as food, ingesting them which then blocks digestive tracts resulting in starvation, or becoming entangled which prevents flight and feeding. This has been well documented by scientists.
- \* Clips and ribbons add to their plastic load. Clips cause choking. Recent research by Adrift Lab demonstrates that these macro-plastics then become micro-plastics, inflicting more harm on the wildlife.
- \* Wildlife affected includes turtles, shearwaters, albatross, petrels and platypuses. Wildlife carers need a great deal of time and resources to rehabilitate affected animals when taken into care.
- \* Farm animals include cows, horses and donkeys.
- \* Released helium balloons result in litter, sometimes hundreds of kilometres from the source, and increased waste. One bunch released in Western Sydney was found three weeks later at Lord Howe Island, a distance of 800 kilometres.
- \* According to the National Litter Index, balloons make up 0.07% of litter. This however is misleading as the impact of balloons is disproportional to the number.



- \* The Australian Marine Debris Initiative Database estimates 25,777 balloons, clips, ribbons and accessories were collected from subject beaches in the five years from 01/01/2017. See map.
- \* Released mylar/foil balloons can also cause power outages and train disruptions
- \* All balloons are considered single use plastic as they do not biodegrade and cannot be recycled. Mylar/foil balloons breakup into micro-plastics.
- \* Releasing helium balloons is not proper disposal which makes them “problematic” and the only way to stop the problem is to remove easy access to helium.
- \* The scarce and difficult to process helium gas is squandered on balloons and should be conserved for important scientific, medical and industrial uses such as cooling MRI machines.
- \* Education does not stop helium balloon releases; law enforcement is non-existent. Balloon releases often occur at memorials and funerals which means council compliance officers will not take action. After the event is too late - litter and threats to wildlife will result.
- \* While ever helium is easily available to the public, any enforcement is, and will be, problematic. Many illegal releases have occurred during 2022 and no enforcement or penalty has resulted.
- \* Helium can be bought from gas suppliers with no control over its use, while helium balloon kits can be purchased from retail stores and discount shops, including on-line.
- \* ***Regulation on the sale and use of helium is needed to ensure balloon releases are stopped at the source i.e. it is not possible to inflate balloons with helium.***
- \* This would also reduce the use of helium for suicide and murder. The Victorian Coroner asked ACCC to regulate the sale of helium but the Therapeutic Goods Administration declined.
- \* Federal legislation to regulate the sale of helium to prevent the release of helium balloons could be considered under: the *Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* which in 2003 had this listing added: threatening process, injury and fatality to vertebrate marine life caused by ingestion of, or entanglement in, harmful marine debris.

Or The Australian Government's *Threat Abatement Plan for the impacts of marine debris on vertebrate marine life of Australia's coast and oceans* which “provides for a co-ordinated national approach to the implementation of measures to prevent and mitigate the impacts of harmful marine debris on vertebrate marine life. The plan complements actions to address litter at its source by reducing waste, increasing recycling and building industry partnerships.” Department of the Environment and Energy reference PDR:MC17-014052.

- \* No action was taken by the previous government. However, previous Minister Evans has said "The Morrison Government takes the issue of marine debris and its impacts on the environment and wildlife very seriously. That is why we are working with the states and territories to reduce litter and other wastes, ***including from balloons***, to reduce their impact on the environment". (Their ref: MC20-004381, my emphasis).
- \* The National Plastics Plan aims to address the plastic problem at the source. Regulating access to helium will stop balloon releases at the source.



Map showing location of balloons and related accessories entered into the AMDI Database from beaches covered by cleanups by Tangaroa Blue Foundation and others.

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