

Environment and Communications Legislation Committee

Joint Submission: Product Stewardship Amendment (Packaging and Plastics) Bill 2019

Beach Patrol 3280-3284 and *Better Buds* fully support the Product Stewardship Amendment (Packaging and Plastics) Bill 2019. We encourage decisive action to address the impact that all single use plastics, particularly plastic-stemmed cotton buds, have on our environment. Reducing the amount of plastic and packaging consumed, increasing the recycling rate and quality of packaging, and reducing the amount that becomes litter and enters the marine environment are all objectives we are extremely supportive of.

This Bill also strengthens the visionary packaging targets announced in 2018, by making them mandatory. If realised, the 2025 National Packaging Targets will have far reaching implications and achieve significant environmental and economic benefits. While there has already been great achievements and innovation, with individual manufacturers changing to more sustainable packaging and products, the industry has taken too long to voluntarily take this step and therefore legislation requiring the banning of these items is required.



Key Points:

- *Beach Patrol 3280–3284* and *Better Buds* fully support the Product Stewardship Amendment (Packaging and Plastics) Bill 2019.
- *Beach Patrol 3280–3284* is a group of volunteers who have collected over 20,000 plastic-stemmed cotton buds from local beaches in the past two years. *Better Buds* is a campaign for a national ban on plastic-stemmed cotton buds and a move to sustainable alternatives.
- Often flushed down the toilet, plastic-stemmed cotton buds are a significant source of marine litter and are found on beaches worldwide, particularly near wastewater outfalls.
- The negative effects of marine plastic litter on marine life and biodiversity are significant, and increasingly well documented globally.
- Alternative measures, including education campaigns and updating sewage treatment plans, have not successfully addressed the problem of plastic-stemmed cotton buds entering the marine environment.
- Plastic-stemmed cotton buds should be included on the list of single use items considered under a national ban (as they have been in Scotland and the EU).

Plastic-stemmed cotton buds: the problem.

The negative impacts of marine plastic litter on marine life and biodiversity are devastating and well-documented. Research conducted by the CSIRO and Imperial College London in 2015 demonstrated how widespread the threat of plastic was for the world's seabirds. It found that nearly 60 percent of all seabird species has plastic in their gut. In 1960, this figure was less than five percent. Researchers predict that, based on current trends, by 2050 99 percent of all seabirds will have consumed plastic.¹

The UK ban and impending EU ban on plastic-stemmed cotton buds is due to the frequency of which they appear in the top 10 marine debris items found on beaches and waterways globally. The research also concludes;

- Plastic cotton buds are harmful to marine animals. Fragments have been found in seabirds and entire sticks found in turtles, causing damage and blockages in digestive tracts.
- Over 600 species, ranging from micro-organisms to whales, are affected by plastic waste.
- Plastic cotton bud stems absorb Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs) while at sea, becoming highly toxic.
- PCBs (polychlorinated biphenols) can enter the food chain, suppressing the immune and reproductive systems of marine organisms.
- Plastic marine litter can host exotic species, assisting in the invasion of alien species, creating a primary threat to global biodiversity.

Locally, since September 2017, Beach Patrol members have spent 2,167 hours collecting, sorting and recording over 20,000 cotton buds found on local beaches. In addition, over 650,000 nurdles (the building blocks for plastic products) and significant quantities of other marine debris have been recovered. This data has been uploaded to the Tangaroa Blue Foundation database, the Australian Marine Debris Initiative (AMDI).

¹ Wilcox, Sebille & Hardesty 2015, <https://www.pnas.org/content/112/38/11899>

Further to this, Tangaroa Blue Foundation beach litter surveys conducted since 2013 demonstrate that plastic-stemmed cotton buds comprise approximately 60 percent of all sanitary items found on Australian beaches.

A national ban: the only long-term solution.

Alternative measures, including education campaigns and updating sewage treatment plans, have been introduced in other countries but they have not been successful in addressing the problem of plastic-stemmed cotton buds entering the marine environment.

After frequent consultation with the Environmental Protection Authority and local water authorities, it's clear that preventing the escape of plastic-stemmed cotton buds into the ocean requires expensive tertiary treatment plant upgrades in the form of a series of specially designed post-treatment screens in addition to a sustained public awareness and human behaviour change programs. We know this to be not only costly and time-consuming but also represents ongoing resources, rather than the comprehensive and long-term solution offered by a national ban.



We believe that a national ban is the most effective mechanism by which zero plastic-stemmed cotton bud pollution can be achieved for the following reasons:

- Upgrading Australia's 181 sewerage outfalls to filter plastic-stemmed cotton buds would be cost prohibitive;
- Attempts to change behaviour around disposal of sanitary products have failed to have sufficient impact;²
- Biodegradable and re-usable alternatives already exist, and some manufacturers are moving, or have already moved, towards producing these sustainable alternatives;
- Legislating a national ban on these products will 'level the playing field' and compel all manufacturers to operate in a sustainable and responsible manner. It will also ensure that manufacturers, such as Johnson & Johnson do not operate with double standards: manufacturing sustainable products overseas but single-use plastic products in Australia.

It is also consistent with the objectives of the Australian Government's Marine Plastic Treat Abatement Plan (TAP), developed in 2009 and reviewed in 2015. TAP objectives include;

1. A general decline in the presence and extent of harmful marine debris in Australia's marine environment;
2. A general decline in the number of marine vertebrates dying and being injured as a result of ingestion and/or entanglement in harmful marine debris.

Public opinion

The attitudes of Victorian residents towards marine and coastal care were surveyed earlier this year and the findings published in the 'Wave 5: Marine and Coastal Community Attitudes & Behaviour Report'.³

The research found that:

- 76 percent of respondents agreed that our marine environment is under real threat;
- 81 percent of respondents cited rubbish and litter as a major or severe threat, and;
- 68 percent of respondents are concerned that sewerage run-off will have a severe impact into the future.

² The State of Victoria Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning 2019, https://www.marineandcoasts.vic.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0029/438329/Final-Report-Wave-5-Victorian-Marine-and-Coastal-Attitudes-Research.pdf

³ The State of Victoria Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning 2019, https://www.marineandcoasts.vic.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0029/438329/Final-Report-Wave-5-Victorian-Marine-and-Coastal-Attitudes-Research.pdf



Steps towards greater stewardship of packaging and plastic products, including plastic-stemmed cotton buds, are urgently required. Such steps, including a ban on plastic-stemmed cotton buds and other single-use plastic products are in keeping with global trends towards greater accountability and environmental sustainability, and in-line with the expectations of the Australian public that our beaches, and unique marine life, are protected.

- ENDS -