Submission to the Australian Senate Enquiry into Waste and Recycling 2017

This submission is in relation to plastic waste and recycling.

1. Waste

Recently is has been discovered that there are microplastics in drinking water – this is just the latest in the many impacts of plastic. From toxins leached into groundwater and waterways from plastic in landfill sites, to choking marine and bird life through bags and debris in and around waterways, to microplastics being ingested by aquatic creatures.

Plastic waste is an increasing problem globally, with impacts on the land and marine environment and now on humans.

Australians are generating around 107kg of plastic waste per person per annum, and whilst plastic recycling is well-established in Australia but only about 14% was recovered in 2014-15.[1]

As plastic does not naturally biodegrade, the ideal solution is to eradicate the use of plastic. However, whilst reductions in plastic use, and developments in alternatives to plastic are encouraging – given the 'cheapness' and convenience of plastic – this will be an all too slow process.

2. Recycling

Not only is there a poor recovery rate for plastic waste in Australia, a lot of that waste is currently being sent overseas for recycling.

Data from the Bureau of Statistics put our Waste Plastic Exports [2] at 175,000 tonnes in 2011-2012 (in 2015-2016 a figure of 263,000 tonnes of plastic was collected for recycling[3] – around half of that plastic is quoted as being exported, along with a further 50-60,000 tonnes of reprocessed plastic pellets before export[4]). China's ban[5] on such imports will have a drastic effect on the recycling industry in Australia.

Recycling plastic lacks economic viability (there is a limited market for recycled plastic, and it is more expensive than product made of new material). More critically, recycling plastic (in the vast majority of cases) only removes the waste problem by 1 generation, as most plastic cannot be recycled again. The number one barrier to a closed loop, cradle-to-cradle scenario for plastic is that recycling weakens the polymer chains and thus, the structural integrity of what you can recycle them into.[6]

Plastic straws are another issue – currently they are virtually unrecyclable – and their inclusion in recycling collections causes many problems in recycling sorting facilities.

Another issue – is waste due to contamination of council collected recycling, largely because of apathy (which we also believe is a huge issue with Australia's waste problems – you don't have to look far to see litter dropped adjacent to rubbish bins, or find a roadside where litter has been thrown from car windows), but also due to confusion about what can be recycled.

Suggested Solutions

1. Tax manufacturers of waste (including retailers distributing single use plastic shopping bags)
2. Tax or place fees on producers of virgin plastics
3. Give concessions/ incentives to those who use recycled content
4. Give concessions/ incentives to manufacturers and retailers who use biodegradable/ waste free packaging and bags

References

1 https://www.environment.gov.au/system/files/resources/d075c9bc-45b3-4ac0-a8f2-6494c7d1fa0d/files/national-waste-report-2016.pdf

2http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Products/4602.0.55.005~2013~Main+Features~Australia%27s+International+Trade+in+Waste?OpenDocument

3http://www.packagingcovenant.org.au/data/Projects/Final_reports/Final_reports_2017/NRRS_201516_for_plastics_packaging__final_report.pdf

4 https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2017/may/22/recycling-in-australia-is-dead-in-the-water-three-companies-tackling-our-plastic-addiction

5https://www.mrw.co.uk/10021778.article?mkt_tok=eyJpIjoiTW1NNFpqTTVaRGt3T0RWbSIsInQiOiJvOFllbmRDdzc3UzJtXC9RWU5UMThtVUdtNXJcL2ZTM3dQbVFhTHFGeVNSWjN0TTR5dGx1YXpsSlBsbk1IWVRxMVpmNElOYmtkZG9EZkNVejdINkxJcXBFK2E1QWFndUxla1VoYk1wSVFveitrVEsyRTlXVUdjelFwUnZsc1FPamVrIn0%3D

6 http://inhabitat.com/the-fallacy-of-cleaning-the-gyres-of-plastic-with-a-floating-ocean-cleanup-array/