

PLASTICS FACT SHEET

Curious about plastic pollution in Victoria?



WHAT IS THE PROBLEM WITH PLASTIC?

- Plastics are made from non-renewable natural resources such as crude oil, gas and coal.
- Plastic has remained the most common category of rubbish picked up on Clean Up Australia day over the last 20 years. In 2009, it made up 29% of all rubbish found.¹
- Plastics never break down, they just get smaller!
- Plastic in the ocean is responsible for killing hundreds of thousands of turtles, penguins and dolphins each year.
- We ingest tiny bits of plastic whenever we eat seafood.²

HOW MUCH PLASTIC DO WE CONSUME?

Australia produces almost 3 million tonnes of plastic per annum of which less than 9% is recycled. Up to 130,000 tonnes of that plastic will wind up in the ocean each year.³

AREN'T GOVERNMENTS ALREADY ACTING TO BAN PLASTICS?

No they're not, at least not in Victoria.

On 29 February 2016, federal environment minister Greg Hunt "threatened" a national ban on microbeads by 1 July 2017 if companies don't voluntarily phase them out.⁴

We don't know any details about what exactly the government is asking companies to ban, or who will be subject to the ban. We don't know whether Australian companies will be disadvantaged if they ban microbeads, but we do know that big multinationals (who supply many of the products) won't be. In reality, a "voluntary ban" is just self-regulation, which rarely works. If the Victorian government was committed to reducing plastic pollution it would ban any cosmetic product containing microbeads from being sold in Victoria.

On 29 February 2016, a meeting of state, territory and federal environment ministers agreed to delay any action for a national ban on plastic shopping bags for at least a year.⁵ The meeting agreed to a weak resolution – to "review options for a coordinated approach". Only following that meeting, at which action on plastic pollution had stalled, did the Victorian government sign on to a national scheme to ban plastic bags. They did this without knowing what the ban would look like or whether it would be effective.

There is no telling when this national scheme will be enacted, or how it will work despite two states and both territories of Australia having some type of plastic bag ban in place for a number of years.

The Victorian government does not have plans to introduce a Container Deposit Scheme. It continually claims that Victoria's beverage recycling rates are the highest in the country – even higher than those states that do have Container Deposit Schemes.⁶ Boomerang Alliance strongly disputes the Victorian Government's claims, which it says is inconsistent with independent data and with its own Litter Reports produced by Sustainability Victoria.

1 <http://www.cleanup.org.au/au/Campaigns/plastic-bag-facts.html>

2 <http://www.globalresearch.ca/not-a-fish-tale-humans-are-ingesting-plastic-thanks-to-ocean-pollution/5516583>

3 https://d3n8a8pro7vhm.cloudfront.net/boomerangalliance/pages/158/attachments/original/1445317763/Environment_Communications_marine_plastic_sub77.pdf?1445317763

4 <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-02-29/microbeads-ban-voluntary-environment-greg-hunt/7207482>

5 <http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/large-states-delay-action-on-bag-ban-at-environmental-roundtable-20160229-gn6mwk.html>

6 <http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/lisa-neville-against-cash-for-containers-recycling-scheme-in-victoria-20150106-12j14t.html>

HOW MANY PLASTIC BAGS DO VICTORIANS USE?

This is difficult to know, because data isn't readily available at the state level. 2004 data published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics shows the nation consuming 6.9 billion plastic bags amounting to 36,850 tonnes of plastic annually.⁷ We estimate that on a simple population basis, Victoria consumes at least 1.7 billion lightweight bags every year – and probably many more than that, because that figure doesn't account for the bans in South Australia, Tasmania, the Northern Territory and the ACT. And that's just retail shopping bags, before we start counting bread bags, freezer bags, bait bags and other forms of plastic bag.⁸

That is hundreds of billions of pieces of preventable plastic floating or caught along Victoria's coastline.

WHERE DO PLASTIC BAGS END UP?

- Australians dump 7,150 plastic bags into landfills every minute, or 429,000 bags every hour.
- Estimates put between 50-180 million bags entering the Australian litter stream every year, with the ABS reporting plastic bags as making up 2% of the litter stream at most surveyed sites in 2006.⁹
- Even correctly disposed of plastic bags can end up being blown away from disposal facilities into the natural environment so it is impossible to conclusively state exactly how many bags escape into trees, rivers and oceans.
- Currently, only 3% per cent of plastic bags used in Australia are recycled.¹⁰

AREN'T THICKER PLASTIC BAGS BETTER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT, BECAUSE THEY ARE REUSABLE?

No. The problem with banning lightweight plastic bags while still allowing thicker plastic bags is that retailers and consumers simply swap one for the other.¹¹

In the states and territories that have banned lightweight bags, and in other parts of the world, many more thicker plastic bags end up in landfill and litter streams.¹²

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN BAGS ARE BANNED?

Just six months in to the introduction of the South Australian plastic bag ban in 2013, approximately 200 million plastic bags were stopped from entering landfill.¹³

In 2008, the Victorian Government, in partnership with the Australian National Retailers Association, Coles, Safeway and IGA, held a trial ban on plastic bags in Warrnambool, Wangaratta and the Fountain Gate area. The trial resulted in a dramatic 79% cut in plastic bag use.

ARE PLASTIC BAGS BANNED IN OTHER AUSTRALIAN STATES AND TERRITORIES? WHAT ABOUT INTERNATIONALLY?

South Australia, the ACT, Tasmania, and the Northern Territory all have plastic bag bans or reduction schemes in place.

Internationally, a significant number of states have moved to remove, reduce or prohibit plastic bags, including; Bangladesh, Canada, Denmark, Hong Kong*, India* (Bombay and Maharashtra), Ireland, Italy*, Northern Ireland, South Africa, Taiwan*, China, the United Kingdom, and the USA.

*Ban

7 <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/featurearticlesbytitle/2498B7E0C5178282CA256DEA000539BC?OpenDocument>

8 <http://www.cleanup.org.au/au/Campaigns/plastic-bag-facts.html>

9 <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/featurearticlesbytitle/3B0DD93AB123A68BCA257234007B6A2F?OpenDocument>

10 <http://www.cleanup.org.au/au/Campaigns/plastic-bag-facts.html>

11 <http://www.adelaidenow.com.au/news/opinion/petra-starke-so-much-for-south-australias-plastic-bag-ban-now-supermarkets-are-selling-them/story-fni6unxq-1226799549537>

12 <http://www.bloombergview.com/articles/2015-08-18/how-a-ban-on-plastic-bags-can-go-wrong>

13 <http://planetark.org/news/display/91>

WHAT AM I GOING TO USE TO CARRY MY SHOPPING IN?

- Reusable shopping baskets.
- Cardboard boxes, which are recyclable.
- Foldable shopping trolleys.
- Reusable bags made from natural material, like cotton, calico or hemp.
- Paper bags sourced from recycled paper or other sustainable sources.

WHY CAN'T WE RELY ON RECYCLING PLASTIC BAGS?

The vast majority of plastic bags don't get recycled, and plastic bags can't be placed in kerbside recycling bins in most local government areas.

Plastic bags are lightweight, easily airborne and buoyant; as such they often 'escape', ending up in waterways and oceans.

HOW WILL I REMEMBER MY REUSABLE BAGS?

"I stick a post-it note on my steering wheel." – Beryl, Glandore

"Keep the bags in the boot of my car." – Piero, Valley View

"Leave my car keys on top of my reusable bags." – Raphaël, Unley

"Get my kids to remind me." – Bernice, Ascot Park

"Clip my shopping list to the bags – it works every time." – Helen, St Peters

"Whichever way I get to the shops – car, bike, foot – I always leave them near the main exit – that way they're within sight when I walk out the door." – Catherine, Glendora

"I put them on my car seat before I get in and once I arrive at the shops and get out the car, they're staring at me so I can't forget to take them in!" – Renee, Flagstaff Hill

ISN'T BIODEGRADABLE PLASTIC OKAY?

Unfortunately not. Most biodegradable plastic takes a long time to break down and can remain intact long enough to pose a danger to marine life.

Some biodegradable plastics are made from natural products like cornstarch – these take the longest to break down so small pieces of these plastics will still be a problem, sometimes for years to come.

Oxydegradable plastics are often polystyrene or PE with chemical additives to make the plastic deteriorate on contact with sunlight and oxygen. These plastics first deteriorate into much smaller pieces of plastic which are easier for sealife to ingest: sealife is then poisoned before those pieces of plastic can degrade.¹⁴

¹⁴ <http://randd.defra.gov.uk/Default.aspx?Menu=Menu&Module=More&Location=None&Completed=0&ProjectID=16263#Description>

IF WE BAN PLASTIC BAGS, WHAT WILL WE USE TO PUT OUR HOUSEHOLD RUBBISH IN?

The most common recommendation is to put household rubbish directly into the bin itself, without a bin liner, then transfer to main or 'outdoor' bin for council kerbside collection when necessary. Separating food and organic waste into a compost bin helps to keep the main household kitchen bin tidy. Check with your local council to ensure this meets their rubbish removal guidelines.

Other alternatives include non-plastic biodegradable or reusable bin liners made out of environmentally friendly materials such as calico.

PLASTIC MICROBEADS

WHAT ARE MICROBEADS?

Commonly known as microbeads, these tiny pieces of plastic, often called microplastics, are less than a millimetre in diameter. They are so small that they are designed to wash straight down the drain. They then flow out to sea because they are too small to be filtered during sewerage treatment. Their small size means they are regularly mistaken for food by a wide range of marine life – from the tiniest plankton and filter-feeding molluscs to crustaceans, fish and even foraging seabirds.

Microbeads can be present in cosmetics such as facial scrubs and cleansers, some toothpaste and laundry detergents.

Microbeads can be made of a number of different types of plastics including polystyrene, polyethylene (PE) and polypropylene (PP) – all of these types of plastic are extremely durable so will be dangerous in our seas for untold years to come.

The USA has already legislated to ban the sale of products containing microbeads.

CONTAINER DEPOSIT

WHAT IS A CONTAINER DEPOSIT SCHEME?

A Container Deposit Scheme gives consumers a 10c refund when they deposit drink containers (including soft drink and beer cans, glass bottles and plastic bottles) at authorised sites. The refund provides an incentive not to litter and returns cash to community groups and schools who recycle.

DO CONTAINER DEPOSIT SCHEMES EXIST IN OTHER STATES?

Victoria will soon be the only mainland state to not have a Container Deposit Scheme. SA and NT already have Container Deposit Schemes, and WA, Queensland and NSW have announced that they will introduce their own in the near future.

HOW MANY PLASTIC DRINK CONTAINERS ARE USED?

Australians buy 118, 000 tonnes of plastic bottles each year.¹⁵

Over time a single plastic bottle can break up into over 10,000 individual pieces of microplastic.

A study conducted by Boomerang Alliance in 2015 showed that 33% of plastic pollution in marine environments was beverage containers alone

¹⁵ <http://www.coolaustralia.org/bottled-water-secondary/>

WON'T A CONTAINER DEPOSIT SCHEME JUST INCREASE PRICES OF DRINKS?

A refundable deposit has no cost to the person who wants to redeem their bottle. A plastic bottle is made with no regard for its use after the consumer has finished with it. If drink manufacturers do increase prices, that increase would be refundable to the consumer.

South Australia has had a container deposit scheme for 35 years. Recently when the container deposit scheme buyback increased from 5c to 10c, there was a 50% increase in recycling refundable bottles.

DON'T KERBSIDE AND PUBLIC PLACE RECYCLING BINS TAKE CARE OF THE PROBLEM OF PLASTIC CONTAINERS IN VICTORIA?

Unfortunately not. Kerbside recycling is very expensive for local councils, who have to pay for it: the cost of recycling for councils is rising at up to 3 times the rate of inflation, and Victorian councils will face rate-capping from the middle of 2016 which will mean they have smaller budgets and less money to spend on services.

Public place recycling bins are a good idea, but they shift the cost burden of recycling onto those councils with more public and tourist attractions.

Kerbside and public place recycling bins are often contaminated. For instance, if somebody puts a recyclable plastic container inside a plastic bag and then puts the bag in the recycle bin, that bag and its contents will just end up in landfill.

The experience in South Australia and elsewhere is that Container Deposit Schemes effectively complement kerbside recycling schemes, by reducing the volume of recyclate, and providing an extra revenue stream for councils. Certain Councils in South Australia have reported annual incomes of up to \$90,000 from containers in kerbside bins.

TAKING ACTION

WHAT IS NINA SPRINGLE DOING ABOUT THE PROBLEM OF PLASTICS IN VICTORIAN OCEANS?

Nina has introduced two bills into the Victorian parliament – one that will phase out plastic bags, microbeads and gratuitous plastic packaging, and another that will implement a refundable Container Deposit Scheme.

Nina's state colleagues have twice introduced a bill to create a South Australian-style Container Deposit Scheme into this state but the major parties have refused to support it. SA has had a highly effective Container Deposit Scheme for over 3 decades.

At the Federal level, Greens' Senator Peter Whish-Wilson initiated an inquiry into marine plastics – the first ever inquiry in Australia into this crucial issue. The Inquiry's tripartisan report recommended that all states and territories ban plastic bags and microbeads, and introduce Container Deposit Schemes.

WHAT CAN I DO ABOUT THE PROBLEM OF PLASTICS IN VICTORIAN OCEANS?

Sign Nina's petition at www.plasticfreesea.com.au.

Get involved with a community group. Check out the list on Nina's website at www.plasticfreesea.com.au/community-groups.

Write a letter to your local newspaper. See www.plasticfreesea.com.au/letters for more info.

Consider every plastic thing you buy or accept and plan how you will avoid it in future.