



14th April 2023

Single use plastics and container deposit scheme submission

The Arid Lands Environment Centre (ALEC) is Central Australia's peak community environmental organisation that has been advocating for the protection of nature and growing sustainable communities in the arid lands since 1980. ALEC actively contributes to the development of circular economy and waste policy through regulatory reform, written submissions, community education and advocacy. ALEC has had a long engagement with waste issues, for example, having operated the Bowerbird Tip shop between 1999 and 2007, as well as having produced television ads promoting the Northern Territory Government's container deposit scheme in 2016.

ALEC welcomes the opportunity to provide comment on the problematic single-use plastics discussion paper (PSUP discussion paper) and container deposit scheme discussion paper (CDS discussion paper).

1. Ban petrochemical facilities from Middle Arm

If the Northern Territory Government is serious about the regulation of plastics across the Northern Territory, then it should ban petrochemical facilities from existing across the Middle Arm precinct. Clearly increasing source material supply along with market failures from government subsidies for this precinct will lead to cheaper plastics and pressure for their local use. Therefore this is a necessary underpinning for a credible stance on single use plastics. This is especially important as the volume of plastics produced by these facilities could dwarf the positive impacts that could arise from these other initiatives.

ALEC strongly supports the banning of petrochemical facilities at Middle Arm.

2. Problematic single-use plastics discussion paper

In 2021, in accordance with all Australian Environment Ministers, the Northern Territory committed to the banning and phasing out of certain problematic single-use plastic items (PSUP) by 2025. The measures proposed in the PSUP discussion paper are necessary initial steps to improve the regulation of problematic plastics across the Northern Territory.

a. What PSUPs are proposed to be banned?

The PSUPs discussion paper is proposing the phasing out of:

- Plastic bags (heavy weight);
- Plastic straws;
- Plastic utensils and stirrers;
- Plastic bowls and plates;
- Expanded polystyrene consumer food containers;
- Microbeads in personal health care products;
- EPS consumer goods packaging (loose fill and moulded);
- Helium balloons (releases).

Other identified items that are up for discussion to potentially be banned include:

- ‘Degradable’ plastics e.g. dog waste bags
- Plastic cotton bud sticks
- Plastic produce bags
- Plastic cups
- Plastic cup lids
- Coffee cups
- Takeaway containers and lids
- Cigarette butts
- Plastic food packaging
- Bottle lids
- Plastic pallet wrap

b. ALEC’s view on PSUP bans

Identified items

The identified list necessarily covers many of the key items that contribute to burgeoning waste issues across the NT. It sees the Northern Territory ‘catch-up’ to some other jurisdictions nationally. ALEC supports the ban of identified items across the Northern Territory.

ALEC strongly supports the banning of EPS products which are truly toxic and harmful products. EPS has disastrous impacts on the environment and this is widely understood.

Other identified items

ALEC strongly supports the banning of degradable products. These plastics confuse consumers and clearly have negative impacts on the environment as they break down into microplastics. Whilst biodegradable or compostable alternatives are not currently perfect, they are less harmful than degradable products.

The list of potential items to be banned includes some that are low hanging fruit e.g. plastic cotton bud sticks, but ALEC understands that these may not be priority items in terms of the amount of waste that is generated compared to say shopping bags.

ALEC understands that there is contention in the literature regarding compostable and biodegradable products. States such as South Australia, Queensland and Western Australia are banning coffee cups, plastic drinking cups, takeaway containers and produce bags, however, they also allow compostable products to be recycled in their food organics garden organics (FOGO) waste streams. States such as NSW do not have a ban on products such as coffee cups and plastic drinking cups as NSW does not consider compostable or biodegradable products as suitable for recycling. ALEC understands this is similar to the Australian Capital Territory’s approach. In changes that occurred in 2022, NSW justified this position:¹

‘Emerging research shows that the impact of increasing compostable plastic content in compost (other than kitchen caddy liners that comply with Australian Standard AS 4736-2006) may impact its safe application to land.

¹ NSW EPA. ‘Fogo information for households’. Accessed April 2023:
<https://www.epa.nsw.gov.au/your-environment/recycling-and-reuse/household-recycling-overview/fogo-information-for-households>

Composts cannot be lawfully applied to land in NSW unless there is evidence that compostable plastics breakdown under normal operational conditions at commercial composting facilities to produce a high quality and safe compost.

A circular economy aims to keep materials in the productive economy and decrease the need for new materials. Compostable alternatives to single-use plastic items are not recyclable and are only used once before being composted or disposed of so do not fit with a circular economy approach.’

Whilst the Northern Territory does not even have FOGO systems established at scale, ALEC nonetheless currently supports caution around products that can only be replaced by compostable alternatives. Decisions regarding the circular economy should be truly circular and creating a new form of compost that is contaminated doesn’t make sense.

NT context

ALEC agrees with the concerns raised in the PSUPs discussion paper in section 9: considerations for the Northern Territory. Bans need to not negatively impact vulnerable groups (e.g. particular medical conditions or those with disabilities) and alternatives need to be affordable. ALEC understands that in Victoria bans exist for the products identified in the NT, but regardless ‘People who need single-use plastic drinking straws due to disability or medical needs can still purchase and use these items’.² Flexibility of this nature is supported.

ALEC sees it necessary that a nationally coordinated approach to PSUPs would create regulatory settings that would support jurisdictions like the Northern Territory to pursue the necessary bans. A nationally coordinated approach or harmonisation of the banning of problematic plastics would then no longer bring with it a financial impediment between cheaper but problematic products and more expensive but less environmentally damaging items across the country. Such an approach would greatly enable jurisdictions like the Northern Territory which have unique resource constraints and a greater proportion of vulnerable peoples across a vast area of land to participate in the better regulation of PSUPs.

Further, bans and greater regulation on plastics in the Northern Territory should correspond with the necessary infrastructure improvements e.g. capacity for FOGO and wider rollout of material recovery facilities across the Territory.

c. Policy options

ALEC supports legislative and regulatory bans for PSUPs. Regulation provides clear direction and parameters to enforce change.

If the Northern Territory is serious about the circular economy principles and objectives, standalone legislation is appropriate. Standalone legislation gives greater rigour that is fit for purpose regarding the very real challenges of waste, recycling and a circular economy in 2023. Standalone legislation may provide greater capacity for product stewardship legislation and design standards for example.

Across the Territory, local government by-laws are already in place banning certain PSUPs from council sites and premises e.g. night markets in Alice Springs/ Mparntwe. There is growing knowledge and understanding that change is coming around the management and regulation of plastics across the Northern Territory and nationally.

² Victorian Government. ‘Reducing plastic pollution starts with us: problematic single-use plastics are now banned in Victoria. Accessed April 2023: <https://www.vic.gov.au/single-use-plastics>.

Considering the Northern Territory is one of the last jurisdictions to move on PSUP bans nationally, ALEC is indifferent to whether it is necessary to initiate procurement procedures that instruct the Northern Territory Government to move first ahead of industry and business.

ALEC supports some level of Territory-wide advertising campaign to support public awareness about the changes what they mean and why they are necessary.

ALEC is supportive of grants and incentives for particular sectors that may initially struggle to transition across to non-banned products e.g. some restaurants and cafes.

3. Container deposit scheme discussion paper

ALEC supports the intentions of the CDS discussion paper to:

- expand and simplify the types of containers included in the scheme;
- increase accessibility to the scheme in regional and remote areas;
- further incentivise container returns;
- improve and streamline reporting requirements for industry;
- reduce the administrative burden on scheme participants and the environmental regulator; and
- harmonise the scheme with other Australian jurisdictions to support market development and the transition to a circular economy.

ALEC strongly welcomes the change to reduce container complexity.

Considering lids are the second most common plastic item found in the Northern Territory environment. Expanding the CDS scheme to include lids would be a great contribution to a substantive environmental hazard.

Regarding what else can be done to improve access to the scheme, improve container returns, and facilities refunds to consumers it is all about access. In Mpartnwe/ Alice Springs the only CDS facility is about as far away from the town centre as it could be. It is located 15km outside of the town centre passed the Alice Springs airport on the Santa Teresa road. Its opening hours are also largely inaccessible for working people, open Monday-Friday 9am-4pm and the first and third Saturday of each month 8am-noon. By comparison the Alice Springs Regional Waste Facility is open Monday-Friday 8am-4pm and 9.30-2.30pm on all weekends. If a CDS location cannot be located in the CBD, then the Alice Springs Regional Waste Facility would be the second best option.

Kind regards



Alex Vaughan

Policy Officer