



**LIGHT WEIGHT PLASTIC BAG BRIEFING NOTE
FOR BRUCE NOTLEY-SMITH, MP – 11 August 2015**

How many plastic bags?

At the last official count in 2007, it was estimated that Australians were using over 3.9 billion single use, check-out plastic bags a year. The voluntary retailer program of reducing plastic bags by 50% ended in 2005. After the program finished, plastic bag use had increased between 2006 and 2007 by 17.0%¹.

However in 2009 the SMH reported that confidential industry data showed that plastic bag usage may be up to 30% higher than the reported figures².

Thus total lightweight plastic bag use could be well over 5 billion a year in 2015 – or 1.68 billion in NSW or 4.6 million a day.

Only a few per cent of these are recycled. Most end up in landfill or a lesser amount as litter. Many people claim they 'reuse' plastic bags as bin liners but this is not recycling (which involves repeated reuse or conversion into long lasting materials).

Those that are littered derive from litterbugs, spill over from bins or are blown away from waste management facilities.

Why are plastic bags a problem?

Plastic bags are made out of high density polyethylene derived from petrochemical sources. According to the 2002 Nolan ITU Report for Environment Australia on 'Plastic Shopping Bags - Analysis of Levies and Environmental Impacts' - just 8.7 plastic checkout bags contain enough embodied petroleum energy to drive a car 1 kilometre.

Consequently throwing them away is a serious waste of resources.

They enter the environment via wind and runoff. Cleanup Australia reports that over 50 million enter the litter stream every year in Australia³ – that's 16.5 million in NSW. They can last 20 -1,000 years.

They are devastating to marine life which mistakes them for food either whole (akin to a jellyfish) or the small pieces from broken up bags helping form the soup of microplastics in the ocean.

The plastic blocks their airways; or lines their stomach – preventing them from digesting food; or can inflate preventing them from diving for food; and young birds are fed the plastic by their parents and starve to death as their stomachs fill with plastic.

The CSIRO has suggested that by 2050, "95% of all sea birds will have plastics in their gut."

Single use plastic bags are often ingested by marine species, particularly sea turtles, who often mistake them for one of their primary sources of food – jellyfish. Green and Hawksbill turtles in Moreton Bay, have

1

Hyder Consulting, Plastic Retail Carry Bag Use: 2006 and 2007 consumption, Final Report, Environment Protection and Heritage Council, February 2008, p.1

2

4 Nov 2009

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

been dying due to plastic bag litter. Marine Biologist Dr. Kathy Townsend from the Moreton Bay Research Station, University of QLD, confirms that approximately 30% of the turtles she autopsies have plastics, including plastic bags, in their intestinal tract with a further 6% killed due to entanglement.

A rare Leatherback Turtle was washed up dead on an Illawarra Beach earlier this year and an autopsy revealed plastic bag ingestion.

In August 2000, an eight metre Bryde's whale died soon after becoming stranded on a Cairns beach. An autopsy found that the whale's stomach was tightly packed with 6m² of plastic, including many plastic check-out bags.

Just this year **a rare and beautiful Risso's Dolphin swallowed a plastic bag floating in the ocean off Sydney, he swam to shore to beach himself and die.** There was little rescuers could do for him. Risso was already critically ill with an infection caused by the plastic lodged in his stomach and had been wounded by a cookie-cutter shark - known to prey on weak and dying animals.

Twenty six species listed as threatened under the Commonwealth EPBC Act were identified as negatively impacted by marine debris, including plastic:

Southern Wright Whale, Green Turtles, Australian Sea Lion, Blue Whale, Loggerhead Turtles, Dugong, Humpback Whale, Leatherback Turtles, Seals, Sei Whale, Hawksbill Turtles, Pelican, Brydes Whale, Olive Ridley Turtles, Wandering Albatross, Grey Nurse Shark, Flatback Turtles, Tristan Albatross, Antipodean Albatross, Indian Yellow Nosed Albatross, Blue Petrel, Grey Headed Albatross, Northern & Southern Royal Albatross, Northern Giant Petrel, Gould's Petrel.

What are other jurisdictions doing about plastic bags?

There are dozens of ban or levy actions around the world from Africa, Asia, Europe and over 100 counties and municipalities in the US⁴. California has just become the first US state to mandate a ban.

In Australia South Australia, The Northern Territory, ACT and soon, Tasmania will have banned lightweight plastic bags. Have they had any impact?

The SA ban came into effect on 4 May 2009 and after 3 years, consumer acceptance is high and the adoption of reusable bags greatly increased.

Waste stream data from Keep Australia Beautiful (KAB) yearly litter count indicates a significant 45% decrease in the percentage of lightweight single-use plastic shopping bags contributing to the litter stream in South Australia, a big improvement compared to the other Australian states and territories⁵.

As indicated some jurisdictions ban the lightweight plastic bag (but have different thickness definitions); others impose various levies.

The committee of Australian environment ministers is currently investigating practical solutions to reduce the impact of plastic bags in the environment. The NSW EPA is leading this process.

4

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phase-out_of_lightweight_plastic_bags

5

G Aspin (2012), Review of the *Plastic Shopping Bags, (Waste Avoidance) Act 2008*



However, the record of the federal approach to packaging is not good – there are lengthy delays and have been repeated studies leading to no consensus nor action. We cannot be confident that substantial action will occur anytime soon. In fact the Queensland government is considering state-based action and has charged an Advisory Committee to prepare a discussion paper for public consultation early next year.

Just as the Queensland government wishes to work with NSW on a container deposits system – NSW should work with Queensland on a plastic bag ban.

The longer we wait the greater the damage.

What are the alternatives?

- Alternatives are: 100% compostable (fully biodegradable) bags; paper bags from FSC sustainable sources; >70% post consumer recycled paper bags; heavy-gauge 'reusable' plastic bags (>100 micron); natural fibre and synthetic reusable bags; baskets, boxes etc.
- Ensure an effective and thorough education campaign for business and consumers precedes the ban and ongoing communications to inform about alternatives and their best use

The Plastic Bag Free NSW coalition which helped organise the petition presented today, has sensibly examined transitional issues and proposed:

- A comprehensive education program and structured transitional period.
- There are issues associated with the sale and transport of perishable foods (eg. meat, fish) and as such there can be exceptions on the use of 'barrier bag' style plastic bags at relevant retailers.
- Other state based plastic bag bans have resulted in an increase in the sale of plastic bag bin liners. PBFNSW have limited concern about the increase in the sale of plastic bag bin liners as they are highly unlikely to become litter. PBFNSW would support access to reduced cost 100% compostable bin liners and investigation and education about other alternatives.
- The ban should extend to takeaway food outlets and smaller retail stores. Research highlights that such stores are a significant source of plastic bag litter as plastic bags are used for a short timeframe and for limited items.
- Effective evaluation and monitoring must be implemented alongside the ban with scope to modify and extend the ban if necessary.
- The increase in the use of heavy gauge 'reusable' plastic bags by retailers must accompany effective recycling programs allowing consumers to thoughtfully dispose of bags at the end of their life.



The Boomerang Alliance allies are: - AFROCAB - Australian Conservation Foundation - Australian Marine Conservation Society - Arid Lands Environment Centre - Beach Patrol - Cairns and Far North Coast Environment Centre - Clean Up Australia - Conservation Council ACT Region - Conservation Council of South Australia - Conservation Council of Western Australia - Cooks River Alliance - Environment Centre NT - Environment Tasmania - Environment Victoria - Friends of the Earth - Greenpeace Australia Pacific - LEAD Group - Living Ocean - Local Government NSW - Mineral Policy Institute - Nature Conservation Council of NSW - Project AWARE Foundation - Queensland Conservation Council - Responsible Runners - SEA LIFE Conservation Fund - Surfrider Foundation Australia - Take 3 - Tangaroa Blue Foundation - Tasmanian Conservation Trust - Total Environment Centre - Two Hands Project - Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland

[a](#) P.O. Box K61, Haymarket NSW 1240 [abn](#) 54 152 721 302
[t](#) 02 9211 5022 [f](#) 02 9211 5033 [w](#) boomerangalliance.org.au