



5 March 2021

EPA Victoria
GPO Box 4395
MELBOURNE VIC 3001

Dear EPA Victoria,

RE: SUBMISSION TO WASTE AND RESOURCE RECOVERY DETERMINATIONS

The Victorian Trades Hall Council (VTHC) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the EPA's Waste and Resource Recovery Determinations consultation.

VTHC was founded in 1856 and is the peak body for unions in Victoria. VTHC represents over 40 unions and more than 430,000 workers across the state. These workers are members of unions that reach into every industry in Victoria, both in the public and private sectors.

Since gaining the Eight Hour Day in 1856, VTHC has had a long history of fighting for and defending the rights of workers in Victoria. This includes fighting for economic recovery through good, union jobs in the new sustainable economy that supports local communities and put workers first.

Investment in resource recovery is a significant economic and environmental opportunity supported by the Victorian union movement. However, the safety of workers and the community needs to remain a primary concern when evaluating health risks in the safe disposal and reuse of waste products. VTHC would like to make the following comments as contribution to this inquiry.

Risks to human health in waste management workplaces

Workers are on the front line of waste management: sorting and processing, preventing the spread of disease and enabling safe resource recovery, which means workers are often the first victims of any health consequences. This means the safety of these workers needs to be a key requirement for waste receiving facilities.

This was made clear in 2020 when a group of migrant workers and Australian Workers Union (AWU) members at Polytrade in Dandenong and Hallam described working in air thick with dust from crushed glass in poorly ventilated conditions. Despite wearing

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personal protective equipment, the dust would get in their mouth and eyes, resulting in chest pain, nosebleeds and blood in the mouth.¹

In another 2019 case, a catastrophic fire caused by poorly managed waste products at a waste storage facility owned by Bradbury Industrial Services resulted in a migrant worker and AWU member being placed into an induced coma. The catastrophic incident revealed that migrant workers at that facility routinely suffered from chemical burns, skin rashes, blisters, nausea and vomiting at that facility due to unsafe workplace practices by the employer.²

The vital role of waste management and resource recovery workers means the EPA must create determinations for each stream with safe workplace practices and conditions front and centre, and emphasise the positive duty of the employer/receiver in order for them to remain authorised to receive waste products.

Any ‘streamlining’ or reduction in regulation that exists to ensure the safety and protection of workers, and in extension, their communities, will not be accepted by VTHC. It is also critical that companies that breach their obligations are investigated, charged and prosecuted quickly to ensure justice for their affected workers. VTHC supports the EPA’s position of zero-tolerance for unsafe waste practices.

Emerging opportunities

In our report *Transition From Crisis*, VTHC recommends the development of a circular economy with strategies that recover resources in a way that is efficient, accessible and safe.³ While recycling has been a major challenge for Victoria for some time now, a circular economy is an opportunity to create a huge number of secure jobs, particularly for communities who have faced economic hardship in the face of COVID-19. In addition to the Victorian Government’s estimated 3,900 jobs (from the Recycling Victoria report), there could be more potential jobs created, including in an expanded recycling supply chain, new high-tech manufacturing processes, and greater demand for education and training for new technologies.

To address market challenges outlined in the discussion paper, the EPA should recommend and support the design of a recycled resource procurement program that

¹ Schneiders, B (2019) ‘Massive wage underpayments at major recycler a national disgrace’, The Age, accessed: <https://www.smh.com.au/business/workplace/massive-wage-underpayments-at-major-recycler-a-national-disgrace-20191005-p52xw8.html>

² Minear, T, Cavanagh, R, Travers, B, Rooney, K (2019) New EPA laws will not be enforced for a year, despite toxic Campbellfield fire, Herald Sun, accessed: <https://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/victoria/new-epa-laws-will-not-be-enforced-for-a-year-despite-toxic-campbellfield-fire/news-story/b14e7eeb337de5f9aea8e0920c42b96d>

³ VTHC (2020) *Transition From Crisis*, Victorian Trades Hall Council, accessed: https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/victorianunions/pages/11116/attachments/original/1600663835/Just_Transitions_5sml.pdf?1600663835

would act as a lever to encourage investment in and viability of closed loop recycling (for example, the procurement of recycled aggregates for building projects to increase consumer confidence in recycled aggregate products).

VTHC looks forward to your recommendations and subsequent actions that will be taken to protect workers from health risks in the EPA's waste determinations.

If you have any questions or would like further information, please do not hesitate to contact Politics and Research Lead, Ted Sussex, on (03) 9659 3511.

Thank you for your consideration.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Luke Hilakari', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Luke Hilakari
Secretary