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**Submission to NSW Government**

**NSW Plastics: Next Steps Discussion Paper. Draft Submission from Catchment Groups**

The NSW Government is ramping up efforts to tackle plastic pollution to prevent 800,000 tonnes of plastic waste produced in NSW each year from causing harm to the environment and human health. Only 12% of these plastics are recycled<sup>1</sup>. The NSW Government is seeking feedback on the discussion paper and what plastic items it should target to minimise harmful impacts. It is also intended that NSW keeps up with other Australian states and territories to ensure coordinated efforts to target the most harmful plastics.

This submission has been written by catchment groups in Sydney comprising of the Sydney Coastal Councils Group, Georges Riverkeeper, Cooks River Alliance and Parramatta River Catchment Group who in collaboration with member councils, partners and the broader community work towards better outcomes for our urban waterways.

**The plastics problem**

Plastic litter accumulates in waterways where it has a detrimental effect on their amenity to the community. Plastic litter in waterways also endangers wildlife, harbours chemicals and can persist for hundreds of years. The discussion paper states that takeaway food and beverage packaging items are some of the most littered plastic items, making up 81% of littered items in general and 32% of plastic littered items in the NSW litter stream with lollipop sticks alone, making up 3%.

Some plastics are more harmful than others including Expanded Polystyrene (EPS) products which can also release toxic substances as they break down, further contributing to environmental pollution. EPS breaks up far more rapidly in the environment than other plastics and due to their lightweight nature, are easily spread by water and wind into waterways. A recent event of a marooned pontoon at Long Reef in December 2023 contained EPS which broke up and was washed up on shorelines as far as Manly and Bondi (figure 5 & 6).

It is understood that monitoring undertaken through the Key Littered Items Study (KLIS) is used to help inform NSW Government bans on single use items. In the KLIS 2022 report on littered items, EPS only represents 3.3% of the total volume of litter. However, it is possible that EPS litter in estuaries makes up a larger proportion of littered items than is represented in the 10 sampling sites of the KLIS. Figures 1,2 & 3 show examples of the extent of EPS pollution in the Georges River in Sydney.

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<sup>1</sup> NSW EPA (2023). Next Steps to beat plastic Pollution. Environment Protection Authority media release, 29 October 2023. <https://www.epa.nsw.gov.au/news/media-releases/2023/epamedia231029-next-steps-to-beat-plastic-pollution-in-nsw>

The discussion paper also notes the increasing exposure to harmful chemical additives in plastics that leach out into the environment as plastics degrade, as well as the harmful microplastics themselves.

### **Current and proposed action on plastics in NSW**

The catchment groups of Sydney work tirelessly to reduce the harmful effect of litter on our waterways through litter prevention, advocacy, capacity building, infrastructure, community engagement and clean-ups. This work includes developing and implementing litter prevention strategies and roadmaps.

Sydney's catchment groups commend the NSW Government's targets to reduce litter by 60% by 2030 and plastic litter by 30% by 2025 as described in the NSW government's litter prevention strategy. We believe that banning problematic and single-use plastics is probably the most important strategy in realising a reduction in the quantity of plastic litter entering our waterways.

We also commend the NSW Government's NSW Plastics Action Plan and the achievements since 2022, including phasing out lightweight plastic bags, single-use cutlery, bowls, plates, stirrers and straws and plastic microbeads in some products.

We note the NSW Plastics Action Plan commits to reviewing additional single-use and problematic plastics in 2024 for potential regulation including plastic bowls and cups with lids, oxo-degradable plastics, fruit stickers and heavyweight plastic shopping bags. There is also the intention to expand the design standard on plastic microbeads to other products and look at design standards for potentially problematic uses of plastics like synthetic turf and crumbed rubber infill. Further, the problematic uses of synthetic turf/rubber crumb have been well demonstrated in their contributions to microplastics and conveyance of these materials into waterways and onto beaches, as demonstrated through AUSMAP sampling.

It is also pleasing to note the enabling of initiatives under the NSW *Plastic Reduction and Circular Economy Act 2021*, providing for phasing out of items, setting product design standards and making brand owners responsible for product life cycles.

The discussion paper proposes consideration of phasing out the following items which are among the most littered plastic items:

- ❖ Takeaway beverage and food packaging - phase out supply of additional items that are unnecessary or where there are suitable alternatives as proposed and/or already implemented in SA and WA; these could include single use plastic cups, bowls with lids and food containers, plastic lollipop sticks, ice cream sticks and other service item sticks.
- ❖ Plastic beverage container bottle lids - introduce design standards requiring plastic beverage bottles to have tethered lids, as proposed and/or already implemented in Europe.
- ❖ Cigarette butts - introduce design standards preventing plastic filters in cigarette butts, working with the Commonwealth for a national approach.
- ❖ Heavy weight plastic film shopping bags - phase out certain types and potentially exempt those that meet specific re-use criteria.
- ❖ Single-serve plastic condiment packages - phase out supply of certain types.
- ❖ Balloon releases - phase out the release of helium balloons and plastic balloon sticks and ties.
- ❖ Other unnecessary and problematic plastic items - phase out EPS food trays, stickers on fruit, pizza savers and bread tags and align with many other states and territories.

Our organisations fully support the next phase plastic bans including: heavy weight plastic bags, single serve condiment packages, lighter than air balloon releases and (EPS) food trays. Consideration should include banning PVC food and beverage containers and phasing out coloured PET containers.

Proposed actions for harmful chemicals in plastics include:

- ❖ Perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) - phase out PFAS.

- ❖ Plastic microbeads in cleaning products - phase out from all cleaning products that are washed down the drain, as proposed and/or already implemented in Queensland and WA.
- ❖ Oxo-degradable, photo-degradable and landfill-degradable plastics - phase out degradable plastics and additives that promote plastic fragmentation, following the lead of WA and SA.
- ❖ Microplastic fibres released from washing machines - introduce design standards to require all new washing machines to be fitted with microfibre filters, aligning with progressive international standards.

Our organisations are also fully supportive of the proposed actions for harmful chemicals in plastics.

We note the Australian Packaging Covenant Organisation (APCO) has an action plan to phase out PFAS which should be strongly supported among its members. It is encouraging that degradable plastics are being targeted to phase out, especially given the likely confusion created for the general public with biodegradability. Consumers may be unwittingly favouring use of degradable plastics when in fact these are potentially worse than more slowly degrading plastics.

### **Additional opportunities to reduce plastics in the environment**

Whilst many gains have been made in recycling, reuse of plastics and phasing out of some plastic items, much more can still be done to find alternatives to plastics.

For example, South Australia has already implemented use of non-plastic alternatives for takeaway coffee cups and lids. Items made from composite materials containing plastics such as takeaway coffee cups that are currently in use in NSW should be considered 'plastic' and included in the ban. SA has also committed to banning single-use plastic beverage containers and food containers in 2024. This precedent should make implementation in NSW much easier whilst reducing the risk of NSW becoming a dumping ground for plastic items banned in other states and territories.

More could also be done to reduce the impact of problem litter in waterways and the environment more broadly through the continued phase outs, with particular focus on EPS products. For example, while bans on EPS materials including takeaway food packaging have already been applied, other EPS products such as packing boxes, loose fill and moulded EPS used for product protection could also be phased out. Other EPS products that could also be considered include pool toy and bean bag fill which spread rapidly once exposed to the environment (figure 4). Accordingly, we recommend that the NSW Government should consider more stringent measures to ban the use of EPS.

It is noted that the APCO has a roadmap to phase out some EPS materials including moulded EPS by 2025. Legislating this in the future NSW Government plastic bans would be a great step and follow other jurisdictions like WA. Having a legislated ban would allow for compliance to occur and apply to producers not covered within the APCO voluntary roadmap.

Plastic bags intended for reuse can still become single-use and can also become littered items, eventually degrading and contributing to environmental pollution. As the community awareness grows due to current bans and programs, we recommend that the NSW government phase out all reusable plastic bags as there are now established alternatives and some merchants are already choosing to use these.

Plastic condiment packages that are over 50ml are still likely to end up in the litter stream. Banning only single serve condiment packages under 50ml may lead to an increase in plastic condiment packaging, because takeaway shops may find the switch to large packaging (more than 50ml) easier than finding an environmentally friendly alternative.

Generally, all soft plastics are problematic with many ending up as littered items. Whilst it is appreciated that takeaway food and beverage packaging are some of the most littered plastic items, there should be consideration to phasing out plastic packaging in general, at least where alternatives are available or can be developed. Plastic chip and confectionary packets are one of the most significant contributors to litter loads in some areas, particularly the tear-away

corners. Alternatives to this are already available, for example Mars have replaced plastic packaging with paper packaging. Timeframes should be set for the phasing out of soft plastic packaging, in consultation with the APCO. Regarding microbeads, there are already many viable organic alternatives made from coconut shell and apricot seeds on the market, so it is possible to fully phase out microbeads.

Brand owner responsibility initiatives for product life cycles do not yet appear to have been implemented although there are provisions for this under the NSW *Plastics Reduction and Circular Economy Act*. Accordingly, we recommend that the implementation of these provisions be given priority. Where plastic items are not being banned or phased out, we strongly recommend that targets be set for industry to develop recycled product. For example, one innovative company has developed a recycled product for bread tags (figure 7).

There are also many other items that are either unnecessary or have suitable alternatives available. Some of these are identified below:

- Rubber bands or plastic ties for fruit and vegetable bunches, which can be replaced with paper or twine
- Plastic fishing lures
- Dental floss brushes and picks
- Cotton buds
- Plastic whipper snipper wire
- Bottles for water, milk and juice, which can be replaced by cartons
- Zip ties, cable ties and plastic-covered wire ties
- Glitter
- Fruit and vegetable netting (e.g. commonly used for citrus or onions)
- Freshness packaging around cigarette boxes
- Protective packaging for fragile goods e.g. bubble wrap, polystyrene.

We support greater action on phasing out balloons. There should be an immediate ban on release of balloons and the NSW Government should work with other states and territories to regulate the sale and use of helium for balloons to stop releases at the source. A number of councils have banned balloons at both indoor and outdoor venues, recognising that all balloons often become litter. Mylar/foil balloons should also be banned as they similarly break up into microplastics. Of particular concern are balloons filled with plastic confetti. Confetti inside balloons and elsewhere is hard to pick up if spilled and is more likely to become litter. For this reason we recommend that all plastic confetti should be included in the next round of bans.

## **Summary**

### **We commend the following:**

1. The development of a schedule of plastic bans for the next phase of implementation in order of priority by volume and number as identified in the KLIS and in consideration of harm to humans and the environment.

### **In addition, we recommend the following:**

2. Align the phasing out of specific plastic littered items with exemplar states, implementing similar bans for which alternatives may have already been identified and set clear time frames for implementation in NSW.
3. Support the APCO as far as possible in its initiatives to phase out EPS and PFAS and work with the APCO in the further implementation of product life cycle legislative provisions.
4. Strategically work towards phasing out all plastic bags, including heavy weight plastic bags intended for re-use which can still end up as single-use and there are many non-plastic alternatives available.
5. Work with the APCO to set timeframes for phasing out all plastic packaging where alternatives can be found or developed.

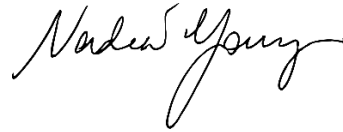
6. Develop a schedule for the progressive ban of all problematic plastics with clear reference to strategic priorities for reducing harm to the environment and human health.
- 7.
8. Prioritise the phasing out of degradable plastic and implement a public education campaign about biodegradability.
9. Give priority to the identification of alternatives to synthetic turf/rubber crumb for sporting fields to reduce their contribution to microplastic contamination of waterways and ocean shores.
10. Likewise, give priority to the identification of alternatives to microbeads, then phase out all plastic microbead products.
11. Ban balloon releases, then phase out mylar/foil balloons and plastic confetti.
12. Implement a public education program about microfibres being released from washing machines, in conjunction with design standards for new washing machines requiring microfibre filters. Include an incentive for the retrofitting of filters to existing machines.
13. Utilise the tools available under the Plastic Reduction and Circular Economy Act as fully as possible, especially product life cycle provisions.

If you have any queries, please contact Sarah Joyce, Executive Officer SCCG by email at [executiveofficer@sydneycoastalcouncils.com.au](mailto:executiveofficer@sydneycoastalcouncils.com.au)

Yours sincerely,



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## Images



*Figure 1. EPS pollution on a foreshore of the Georges River*



*Figure 2. EPS pollution present in flood debris along the Georges River*



*Figure 3. Large quantities of EPS pollution present in strand line debris in the Georges River*



*Figure 4 Individual EPS balls originating from a pool toy or bean bag present along the Woronora River. Pollution extended for hundreds of meters.*



*Figure 5. Pontoon containing EPS washed up at Long Reef, December 2023*



*Figure 6. EPS fragments found washed up as far as Bondi Beach a few days later*



*Figure 7. Bowl made from recycled bread tags, origin Robe SA*