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EPR – all talk and little action

The Australian Council of Recyclers (ACOR) strongly assert the need for Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) to include additional items. These items contain toxic and hazardous materials and present significant environmental and safety risks to the resource recovery sector and to the community generally.

ACOR members are frustrated at the focus on EPR for plastic bags and cigarette butts instead believing attention is better invested in hazardous products such as gas bottles, lead acid batteries, smoke detectors and fluorescent tubes in State and national programs.

Gas bottles and cylinders present a considerable OH&S risk to the waste and recycling industry due to potential of explosion if the pressure vessel is ruptured.

There is no program to collect, safely decommission and dispose of old, outdated or damaged bottles and cylinders - so the public dispose of them anyway they can with potentially devastating consequences.

In April 2006 two major incidents occurred in Queensland with exploding gas bottles. In one incident a plant operator at a landfill inadvertently ran over a gas bottle with residual gas in it. The bottle exploded, causing severe burns to the operator. In another, a tractor operator in Brisbane cutting grass in a vacant paddock, ran over a gas bottle which again exploded. The tractor caught fire and the operator was critically injured.

Metal shredder operators have banned gas bottles in scrap deliveries. They, inspect all loads and some pay employee bonuses for bottles recovered. Each bottle has the potential to cause an explosion, damage expensive equipment and create unnecessary down time. However, many bottles get hidden in scrap.

One member has relocated at a cost of \$20 million to overcome complaints regarding shredder explosions created from gas bottles and other sources. In a recent Land and Environment Court case a recycler was fined and ordered to pay costs of \$19,500 over an explosion.

End-of-life, apparently empty, gas bottles particularly BBQ gas bottles, will always have enough residual propane, LPG or butane to be dangerous in a scrap yard or landfill. These bottles need to be completely purged with an inert gas and the cylinder punctured to be no longer considered dangerous. This costs a few dollars and probably needs a few dollars as a bounty to provide incentive to divert this material towards an EPR scheme. The Scheme needs to also educate the community and promote the awareness and disposal procedure necessary to maximise the safe recovery of these potential 'bombs'.

Such an EPR scheme can work alongside successful gas bottle exchange programs such as the familiar "Swap 'n Go" initiative run by Elgas who safely decommission any end-of-life cylinders retrieved from the public.

ACOR members have made repeated and strong requests to the various state governments over the past 10 years, to take action on this issue yet today we are no further ahead.

Another product causing grief to MRF's and AWT providers are **Lead Acid Batteries**. The GRL, UR-3R facility at Eastern Creek in Sydney is capable of processing 175,000 tonnes of MSW and



produces a high quality compost certified to AS 4454. However, audits reveal that 1 x 12 volt car battery is delivered in every 12.5 tonnes (0.08 batteries / tonne). This equates to 15,000 batteries pa or up to 80 batteries / day. Up to 50% of these batteries are crushed with spillage of lead and lead salts creating a significant heavy metal problem.

Smoke detectors contain a low level radio active isotope and may present a risk to waste processors as the radio active isotope (e.g. americium 241) has a much longer half life than typical compost processing duration. Sustainability Victoria's advice is "Smoke detectors are required to be returned to the supplier for disposal" and given that this is recognised by government, these items should be covered by a robust EPR program. In NSW the Building Legislation Amendment (Smoke Alarms Act) 2005 requires that landlords ensure smoke alarms are fitted and maintained to all residential premises. The number of smoke detectors is set to dramatically increase yet an approved disposal route does not exist.

Increasingly **fluorescent tubes** are being used in the domestic sector thanks to the PR activities of government departments seeking energy savings. The tubes and bulbs contain mercury and warrant consideration of an EPR program given their toxicity and potential to contaminate recycle and end products from AWT plants.

The materials outlined above have the ability to create environmental harm, injure public and employees, damage equipment and products from activities seeking to achieve greater resource recovery outcomes.

ACOR calls on all governments for action.

Copies of the ACOR submissions to both government inquiries are posted on our website www.acor.org.au What's New hotlink

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