



MEDIA RELEASE

COVID CONSUMPTION CHANGES CAUSING NEW PLASTICS PROBLEMS

Urgent action is needed to manage the additional volumes of plastic waste being generated by Australians during the COVID-19 shutdown.

Australian Council of Recycling (ACOR), the peak national body for the recycling sector which employs some 50,000 Australians, today expressed concern over the effect COVID-19 is having on Australia's recycling and resource recovery system.

"As people are staying at home more, there are exceptionally high levels of soft plastic going through the system. This includes items like fresh food packaging, biscuit wrappers, pasta and bread bags, some ready-to-eat meal packaging, the wrapping around paper towels and toilet paper, postal and delivery sacks, and plastic shopping bags. Regretfully, too much of this soft plastic is ending up where it does not belong – the kerbside recycling bin – and that spoils our good recycling efforts as a country," Pete Shmigel, ACOR CEO, said.

"As per local Councils' instructions, soft plastics do not belong in kerbside recycling bins. Soft plastics – those items that can be scrunched into a ball - need to go into the dedicated recycling bins provided in Australia's supermarkets. Consumers should return soft plastics when they do their essential shopping," Shmigel said.

The following trends have been seen by the recycling and waste industries in the last two months:

- Householder kerbside recycling volumes and waste volumes up by over 10%.
- Contamination of kerbside recycling at unprecedented levels in some locations, especially from soft plastics.
- Recycling from business sites is down by over 20% which impacts on the overall viability of the industry.
- Industrial orders for recycled content plastic resin are significantly down.
- Export markets for Australian recyclates reduced by 35% in one month from December to January.
- Return of soft plastic by consumers to supermarkets has stayed at steady – which means extra material being consumed is not being fully captured for recycling.

Put into context, a report released late last year by Australian Packaging Covenant Organisation (APCO) found that of the 5.45 million tonnes of packaging placed on the market in Australia in 2017–18, paper and paperboard had the highest recovery rate at 63%, followed by metal packaging at 48%, glass packaging at 46% and plastic packaging at a rate of only 16%.

According to the Australia Council of Recycling CEO Pete Shmigel, COVID19 is adding to the massive challenges of plastic recycling in general.

“Before COVID-19 emerged, the nationally adopted target for plastic packaging being recycled was set at 70% of plastic packaging being recycled or composted, and a commitment was made to the phase-out of problematic and unnecessary single-use plastics packaging. With these new and unexpected trends, these targets will be even harder to hit by 2025,” Shmigel said.

“We need change at both the supply and demand ends: behavioural changes from Australians to get it right at the kerbside and to return soft plastics to supermarkets, and; policy changes from governments, including:

- Federal Government helping consumers by making recycling labels mandatory rather than voluntary for brand owner companies, and;
- Federal, State and local governments proactively purchasing recycled content products such as plastic roads, noise barriers and other items.

"Upcoming communications campaigns to help consumers reduce kerbside recycling contamination from the Governments of South Australia and Victoria are very welcome in this context, and their example should be followed by the other States. These campaigns go a long way to help inform Australians on what to recycle where, but it is ultimately all our responsibility to actively learn correct methods. In short - if you buy it, know how to recycle it.

“These necessary and low-cost initiatives keep hi-viz recycling jobs in cities and regions going in a time of COVID19, and they give Australians the opportunity to help the environment while they’re at home more,” Shmigel said.

To learn more about best-practise kerbside recycling during COVID-19, go to <http://www.acor.org.au/covid-19.html>

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