

Communique – Governments Focus on Plastic Shopping Bags

Third Meeting of the Environment Protection and Heritage Council
23 December 2002

Commonwealth, State and Territory Environment Ministers met today as the Environment Protection and Heritage Council, and agreed to a package of measures to reduce the environmental impacts of plastic bags.

The EPHC had asked the National Packaging Covenant Council to provide specific proposals for national action, including ways of reducing the impact of plastic bags as litter.

Ministers noted the work undertaken by the National Packaging Covenant Council and the National Plastic Bag Working Group in investigating workable approaches to reducing the environmental impacts of plastic bags agreed on a mix of short and longer term actions, rather than a single instrument.

Ministers will ask industry and the community to work together to cut plastic bags litter by 75 per cent by the end of 2004.

To assist the community to achieve these targets, they agreed to the following four critical short term actions:

- Government to develop legislative options, including a possible plastic bag levy and ban on plastic bags.
- Retailers to develop and implement a strong National Code of Practice for the Management of Plastic Retail Carry Bags by April 2003, which includes targets for recycling and reductions in plastic bag use. Ministers have challenged retailers to meet the following targets for the Code over the next two years.
 - 50% recycling rate for HDPE plastic bags;
 - 50% reduction in the number of HDPE plastic bags used;
 - 90% participation rate of retail chains and 25% participation rate of small retailers in the Code.

Retailers are expected to make significant progress towards meeting these targets by the end of 2003.

- Develop a proposal for a coordinated national customer and retailer awareness program and encourage continued participation in current litter programs such as the Clean Up Australia *Bag Yourself a Better Environment* campaign.
- Undertake a comprehensive study on the full impact on the introduction of degradable plastic bags into the Australian market place, including the effect on national recycling, local manufacturing and landfills and develop a national standard for the use of degradable plastics in Australia by December 2004.

Ministers noted the success of the Irish levy on plastic shopping bags in decreasing plastic bag consumption but agreed further work was required to clearly define the type of levy appropriate and constitutionally feasible for Australia.

Ministers also asked senior officials to progress a number of other measures including:

- a range of plastic bag litter abatement activities;
- undertake further research to complete identified information gaps;
- provide consumers with information on alternatives; and
- work with relevant agencies to investigate and advise on hygiene standards for bags used to transport pre-packaged goods.

Ministers also asked the National Packaging Covenant Council to review and report back to Council on the effectiveness of the agreed measures by December 2003.

Given the overlap between plastic bag and marine pollution issues, Ministers also signalled the release of a brochure *'Keeping Tabs on Marine Debris'*.

Marine life, in particular turtles, is prone to mistaking plastic bags for jellyfish, ingesting them and dying of intestinal blockage.

The brochure includes a marine debris survey form to be used by community members helping with beach clean-up days.

The Marine and Coastal Community Network will distribute the brochure nationally from 24 - 31 January 2003.

Media contact:

Dr Bruce Kennedy
NEPC Service Corporation

Phone: (08) 8419 1200
Email: bkennedy@ephc.gov.au