

Submission to the Department of Agriculture, Water and Environment on Regulating the Export of Mixed Plastics Technical Discussion Paper



February 2021

Status of this Submission

This Submission has been prepared through the Municipal Waste Advisory Council (MWAC) for the Western Australian Local Government Association (WALGA). MWAC is a standing committee of WALGA, with delegated authority to represent the Association in all matters relating to solid waste management. MWAC's membership includes the major Regional Councils (waste management) as well as a number of Local Government representatives. This makes MWAC a unique forum through which all the major Local Government waste management organisations cooperate.

This Submission therefore represents the consolidated view of Western Australia Local Government. However, individual Local Governments and Regional Councils may have views that differ from the positions taken here.

Due to the timeframe for Submissions, this Submission has not yet been considered by MWAC. It will be put before the Council at the upcoming meeting on Wednesday, 24 February. The Department will be informed of any changes to this Submission following consideration by MWAC.

Background

The Association appreciates the opportunity to comment on the Technical Discussion Paper on regulating the Export of Mixed Plastics. WALGA, through the Australian Local Government Association, has provided feedback to the Department who worked with other jurisdictions to develop the National Waste Policy Action Plan. Through this process, WALGA repeatedly highlighted the challenge for Western Australia is the reliance on export for the majority of the recyclable materials listed and the lead time that would be required to develop alternative environmentally and economically sustainable markets.

In commenting on the Action Plan the Association identified the following key actions required for the bans to be successfully progressed:

- Immediate action to determine destination of recyclable materials
- Clear definition of when a recyclable material becomes a product
- Effective product stewardship schemes in place
- Assessment of current and future infrastructure needs
- Investigation of economics of recycling, market development and contingency planning
- Development of incentives and funding Programs.

The most recent Recycling Activity Report (summary provided in Table 1) provides a snapshot of the current situation regarding the high dependence on export for these products.

Material	Tonnage recycled	Percentage Exported
Cardboard and Paper Packaging, old newsprint and white office paper	238,500	98.4% (234,700 tonnes)
Tyres	33,500	100% (33,500 tonnes)
Plastics	20,000	69% (13,800 tonnes)
Glass	55,800	0%

Table 1: Summary of information from 2018/19 Waste Authority Recycling Activity Report

A comprehensive audit of kerbside recycling bins was undertaken as part of the Container Deposit Scheme implementation, the results indicated that mixed plastic – which will be completely banned from export – was 2.2% of the material collected through kerbside. The 18/19 Local Government Census showed that, Statewide, 225,673 tonnes of material was collected through kerbside recycling. As an approximation, using these figures equate to 4,900 tonnes of material collected through kerbside being mixed plastic.

From 1 July this year, other options will be needed for this material, either further sorting or reprocessing within Australia. Some mixed plastic from WA is currently being sent to South Australia for further processing, however it is not clear if the facility has capacity for additional mixed plastic from WA facilities. The State and Federal Government have committed considerable funding for infrastructure to assist in reducing Australia's reliance on export. The WA Government recently [announced](#) \$174M funding for this infrastructure. One of the Projects focuses on mixed plastic, however it is a very short timeline for the sorting facility to be completed by 1 July 2021. Local Governments have also questioned if the focus for the grants will be sufficiently broad to include all types of plastic as only PET, HDPE and PP are mentioned in the media statement in relation to processing.

Plastics Ban – Container Deposit Scheme

In the initial definitions relating to the Export Bans, material collected through a container deposit scheme was considered to be sufficiently source separated (with low contamination) that it could still be exported. From discussion with the Department, the Association understands that this is no longer the case and the source of the material is not part of the consideration. The WA CDS commenced on 1 October 2020 and is progressing well. Through the Scheme there are specific requirements on exporters of material, which means the Scheme Coordinator has accredited certain recyclers having examined their credentials. The suggested licensing approach for export potentially adds additional burden to this process. The Association suggests that the Department examine the process undertaken by the Scheme Coordinator to determine if the approach meets the Departments requirements which could reduce unnecessary regularly burden on those undertaking recycling activities.

Impact of Export Bans

In previous Submissions the Association has highlighted grave concerns for the timelines and approach taken for the export bans – for paper and cardboard, tyres and plastic which may result in either recycling not being possible and material being landfilled, or that the costs to recycle material within Australia being so significant for Western Australia that it would undermine the viability of the current kerbside collection system.

Local Governments in Western Australia, are paying for recycling to be collected and processed, as there is not enough material value in the recyclate to underwrite the system. The recently implemented container deposit scheme is anticipated to have a positive economic (and environmental) impact on kerbside recycling, as although the amount of material collected will reduce, the value of what remains will increase substantially. However, this increase in value of products will not affect approximately 66% of the material in Kerbside, which is paper and cardboard. Consequently, Local Government would also need to consider changes to contractual arrangements.

For Western Australia, markets in Asia are frequently more economically and environmentally efficient to trade with than other areas of Australia. The necessary condition for this to continue is that appropriate safeguards are in place to ensure the material is being used in an environmentally sound manner following export.

The Association would like to ensure that there is sufficient capacity in the market for processing collected material prior to the Bans being implemented. Further clarification is required on the type of 'specifications' which the exported material will need to meet. The Association requests that in developing the legislative instrument for the bans there be sufficient discretion that if it is the choice is between export (to a legitimate destination/process) and landfill, that the option of export be allowed. Following implementation of the ban, there will be a need for effective contingency planning to be put in place to ensure that should a plant be impacted by natural disaster, including fire, there will be

alternative destinations available for the product. This is potentially an activity that could be undertaken at a national level.

Additional Feedback

Feedback from Local Governments has indicated that not all Material Recovery Facilities are supplying directly to recyclers, instead they transact through a broker/buyer. The Local Government procurement requirements mean that Local Government entities operating Material Recovery Facilities go to tender every three months for buyers for the product. Through this process extensive photographs are taken of the material to inform the buyer of the product quality.

Further clarification was requested regarding the need to separate mixed plastics, post 1 July 2021 and whether this step required the plastic to be washed. In the Rules for Plastic there will need to be clear guidance on what 'further processing' for all plastic entails and what the contamination metrics will include – if they are additional to what industry standards or market requirements are.

The Association understands further consultation will be undertaken on this matter and looks forward to providing input.