



CONSERVATION COUNCIL

ACT REGION

Submission: Phasing out single-use plastics Discussion paper

July 2019

The **Conservation Council ACT Region** is the peak non-government environment organisation for the Canberra region. We have been the community's voice for the environment in the Canberra region since 1979. Our mission is to achieve an ecologically sustainable and zero net carbon society through advocacy, education, research and engagement with community, the private sector and with government.

We represent more than 45 member groups who in turn represent over 15,000 supporters. We harness the collective expertise and experience of our member groups and networks. We work collaboratively with Government, business and the community to achieve the highest quality environment for Canberra and its region.

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Introduction

The Conservation Council ACT Region welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Discussion Paper: *Phasing out single-use plastics*.

The Conservation Council acknowledges that plastic can play an important role in our society as a uniquely malleable, cheap, adaptive and variable product. We rely on plastic in its various forms every day – in our homes and offices, in construction and technology.

However, as a society we must address problematic and unnecessary use of plastic. Many plastics are contributing to plastic pollution in our oceans and waterways, and our landscapes. Plastic pollution poses great threats to our wildlife, especially through residual micro-plastic particles, which are readily absorbed by plants and animals and disseminated through the food chain. Plastic pollution in the ACT has detrimental downstream impacts on other ecosystems, such as those in the ocean and national parks, and ultimately contributes to the global plastic pollution problem. In the ACT, the consumption of plastic is also a factor in increasing our ecological footprint, including greenhouse emissions. Furthermore, the manufacture of plastic through the burning of fossil fuels and use of rapidly diminishing resources contributes to the climate crisis and overuse of our natural resources at a rate that is unsustainable for a safe and liveable future.

We welcome the Discussion Paper's emphasis on the extent of the plastic pollution problem globally and locally: the ubiquitous nature of the problem needs to be highlighted. We also welcome the acknowledgment that 'the current life-cycle of plastic means that no matter how good we are at recycling, the only way to reduce the impact of single-use plastic is to avoid using it in the first place.'¹ It is necessary to address the source of the problem over the long term by changing the way we produce and consume plastics. The shift towards a circular economy in which plastics never become waste, while creating economic opportunities, could be an effective strategy for tackling the problem of plastic pollution if implemented effectively.

The Conservation Council ACT Region believes that the Discussion Paper on single-use plastics is a helpful starting point, but the ACT could be more ambitious in its scope in the short-term as well as setting in train a plan to make further changes over the medium term. It is important that push to reduce plastic pollution is not seen as completed once the low-hanging fruit of single-use plastics is dealt with. There are further changes that can be made via procurement policies and sector reform that would significantly reduce the cost that over-use of plastics is having in our community. The ACT has the opportunity to be a national and international leader in tackling plastic pollution by laying out an ambitious agenda over the longer-term that tackles the systematic and cultural issues of cutting our use of plastic.

¹ Single-use plastics Discussion Paper, page 13.

Single-use plastics in the ACT

Definitions of single use

The Discussion Paper defines single-use plastics as ‘plastic consumer products that are designed to be used once, often away from home, and rapidly discarded. This includes plastic bags, plastic-lined disposable cups, takeaway containers, straws and cutlery.’ The increasing well-known phrase of “single-use plastics” does not account for the many other products that are “used once and then thrown away”; in reality this extends to an additional suite of items, from the plastic packaging that we buy our food pre-wrapped in (everything from breakfast cereal to pasta) to the bottles from which we consume shampoo and prescription medications. While some of these plastic containers could be used again or repurposed, in general we know that they are not, and that they are being recycled or fed into landfill. It is important to be cognisant of this as it points to the current responses by governments across Australia as addressing “the low hanging fruit” in terms of plastic reduction, and highlights that structurally there is far more to be done to ensure that the community consumes and disposes of less plastic.

So as to prepare a more comprehensive response to the full range of wasteful single use plastics, the ACT Government should outline a plan for cutting plastic consumption across businesses, households and the government. There are many more opportunities than those outlined in the paper to reduce plastic consumption. While the Council acknowledges that the *Discussion Paper on single use plastics* is a first step in alleviating plastic pollution in the ACT, and speaks to many of the items found in our environment as litter, when consideration is given to the impact that plastic production has with regards to greenhouse emissions, the impact on landfill, and even the costs of recycling, as a community it is clear that we need to take the further step of limiting use wherever possible. After implementing measures to cut the use of the items raised in the Discussion Paper, there needs to be further work to be undertaken by government and the community to extend the reach of this policy direction into other plastic products and containers, and other sectors that have high consumption of plastic across Government, business and the community.

Recommendation

- The ACT Government should ensure that definitions of ‘single use plastics’ doesn’t limit the response by Government with regard to reducing the overuse of plastic across the community in the medium term.

Cultural change and community education

It is important to acknowledge the many benefits that plastic has brought to our society since it first became easily manufactured in the 20th century. Plastic is light, strong, cheap and highly adaptable to suit the purpose required - from electrical components to car parts, wrapping and packaging. It has made our lives more convenient, delivered more sophisticated products into our lives, and has been used to improve hygiene across the food and medical sectors.

It is for some of these reasons that we will need a cultural change to affect a significant reduction in plastic consumption. While there are many alternatives to using plastic, in particular with regards to food consumption, a loss of convenience and the perception of a loss of hygiene, will make it hard for some to change their behaviours. Government can play an important role in leading the community towards a better understanding of the impact and costs associated with plastic that are invisible to many, and work with stakeholders to deliver community education about alternate products and systems that can be implemented which will deliver the same or similar benefits without using plastic.

Recommendation

- Action to phase out the use of single use plastic should be accompanied by an investment in ongoing community education about the impact of plastics on local and global environments, until there is broad community acceptance.

Using alternate products to replace plastics

There are many alternate products to plastic that are available, such as paper, bagasse, bioplastics and sugarcane. It will be important to establish viable ways to manage any waste generated from the introduction of alternate products to ensure that the community has confidence in the solutions being proposed. Community and business confidence will be undermined if there is a perception that alternative products are creating additional problems in the waste stream or are being sent to landfill irrespective of their capacity to be composted. Therefore, the waste stream will need to be managed and prepared for the introduction of plastic alternative products entering the consumer market in significant quantities.

For example, with regard to plastic bags, 'biodegradable and compostable' bags have been put forward as an alternative option. However, aside from still occurring in the environment as litter, biodegradable bags need to be disposed of in specific ways so as to break down effectively. The standard AAS 4736-2006, found in regulations pertaining to the ACT Plastic Bag legislation² requires bags to meet a number of requirements about how quickly they break down, their impact on composting processes and the presence of heavy metals. However, the high temperatures required to break them down, while present at municipal and industrial aerobic composting facilities, do not occur in terrestrial or aquatic nor home composting environments. In addition, bags still break into smaller pieces meaning they can still enter the environment as a full bag or small pieces. This renders the biodegradable bag on partial in meeting the objectives of the legislation, and challenges community confidence in the Plastic Bag ban.

Sugarcane alternatives are manufactured from sugarcane pulp, a by-product remaining after the juice has been extracted. These products are home compostable and kerb side recyclable, if not too soiled. This alternative is sturdy, versatile and water resistant. Sugarcane food packaging has been successfully utilised by the large Canberra born fast food chain Zambreros, which has 190 restaurants across Australia, thus demonstrating the viability of sugarcane as an alternative to plastic products.

² Plastic Shopping Bags Ban Regulation 2011, ACT.

Sugarcane takeaway container:



Sugarcane plates:



Bioplastics are made from a variety of sources such as corn, which is broken down into PLA, or polylactic acid. It is sustainable to produce, as it's made from the waste products from the production of corn, which is also easy to grow. PLA can be used to make drinks bottles, various food grade containers, as well as films.

Bioplastic food containers and cups:



Recommendations:

- The ACT Government must ensure that any action that encourages alternative products to replace single use plastics is considered holistically as part of broader waste management practice in the Territory.
- The ACT Government should research synergies for introducing compostable plastic, primarily into packaging of organics, to supplement the proposed ACT household organic collection scheme.

Single-use plastics that should be regulated

The Conservation Council supports regulation to prevent the distribution and use of the listed items in the discussion paper:

- **Expanded Polystyrene (foam) plastic food containers and beverage cups –** Polystyrene cannot easily be recycled and other products are already easily substituted. It is a high priority to ban the use of expanded polystyrene.
- **Plastic straws** should not be routinely distributed in cafes, restaurants, pubs and bars, with paper and metal straws available on request. However straws should still be available for sale at supermarkets to accommodate those people who require straws for their personal use. Further restrictions on banning plastics straws should be undertaken in consultation with disability advocates.
- **Plastic stirrers:** should be banned for use in the ACT.
- **Plastic cutlery** the distribution of plastic cutlery with takeaway food sales should be banned in the medium term. Alternative products are already available that can be provided by retailers, and consumers can easily carry cutlery with them. If plastic cutlery is not banned, then the ACT Government should include it in its community engagement campaign for responsible cafes and takeaway food outlets.
- **Disposable plastic-lined coffee cups and lids:** Consumers can and do easily carry reusable coffee cups with them as part of their daily routine. Reusable coffee cups come in different materials and sizes to suit all needs. In addition, schemes to use and return coffee cups are being developed for implementation across the city. Given that coffee cups and lids are currently being recycled in the ACT, the focus should be on ensuring that coffee cups and lids make it into the correct waste stream. In the medium term, and after further community engagement, takeaway coffee cups should be banned.
- **Disposable plastic plates and cups –** alternative products are available on which to serve food. The distribution of plastic plates and cups by food outlets at public events should be banned. Single-use plastic plates and cups should also be banned at restaurants / cafes (currently rarely used in this context).
- **Lightweight fruit and vegetable bags (barrier bags) –** should be banned as a high priority. There are many alternative products available that are easily carried to the supermarket/market by consumers, such as net produce bags. Paper bags could be made available for small produce, and other fruit and vegetables can be carried without any packaging.

Mesh produce bag:



We would also support consideration by the ACT Government to regulate the sale and / or distribution of the following:

- **Water in plastic bottles** – tap water is readily available and consumers can easily carry water bottles with them. The sale of water could be restricted to larger containers such as 2L or more to reduce the impact of drink bottles being found as litter. Consideration could also be given to regulating other drink containers, although manufacturers are moving back to using glass bottles which are fully recyclable.
- **All reusable plastic bags above 35 microns** - including boutique bags (ie. heavy grade 'reusable' plastic bags used for clothes, books, appliances etc) 'green bags', 'biodegradable' and 'compostable' bags. Carry bags can be made of fabric such as cotton or nylon, last for many years, pack up small in people's bags, and carry considerable weight. Many retail outlets such as clothing shops are already using paper bags instead of plastic boutique bags.
- **Takeaway food containers** - with more and more meals being consumed from take-away outlets and restaurants every day, the consumption of plastic takeaway containers is considerable. While some consumers may re-use these containers, they generally have a limited life and are thrown away after the meal is finished. Alternative products are available (see above) however these might initially come at a higher cost to the businesses. In addition, it will be important to ensure that the waste stream is able to recycle these containers appropriately. An alternative option is that consumers are able to bring their own food containers to purchase takeaway food. Restricting the use of plastic takeaway food containers should be a medium term objective for the ACT Government, with an emphasis placed on preparing the waste stream for alternative products.
- **Take-away sauce containers (eg. tomato / soya sauce)** – should be banned in the short-medium term. Small sauce pods are included with takeaway meals but are difficult to recycle due to their size. Sauce can easily be added at the point of sale or at home if food is home delivered.
- **Plastic wrapping of fruit and vegetable portions** - Supermarkets have increasingly begun pre-preparing fruit and vegetable portions for consumers, such as half a pumpkin or a bag of pre-chopped vegetables. In some circumstances, plastic

packaging is being used to designate the purchase size, such as a serve of six apples. While many of these serves are likely to be packaged outside the ACT, the ACT could send a strong signal to the national producers that such packaging is wasteful and generally unnecessary by preventing the sale of such products in ACT supermarkets. Retailers / producers could apply for exemptions where it is considered integral to the quality of the product to use plastic packaging and where no alternative packaging easily available.

Plastic wrapped pre-prepared apple portion:



- **Soft plastic wrap on home-delivered newspapers:** Newspapers themselves have a generally short life, and only occasionally get caught in the rain. The weekly distribution of “unsubscribed” newspapers to every house in Canberra wrapped in soft plastic should be banned. The current practice results in decomposing newspapers put in landfill bins, or otherwise households left separating the soft plastic from the paper before disposal.
- **Balloons:** the ACT should regulate the release of balloons into the environment as has been done in Queensland. There are alternative ways to celebrate special occasions without releasing balloons. Balloons should not be distributed at public events as they often end up as litter and the sticks and small parts are not easily recyclable.
- **Single-use plastic tablecloths:** should be banned at all public events as alternatives are easily available. Restaurants should also be banned from using single-use plastic tablecloths.

Recommendation

- The Conservation Council recommends that the ACT Government develop a time-lined strategy to phase out all of the above items, giving consideration to the environmental impact, any inadvertent consequences of regulating, community understanding, behaviour and expectation, and the availability of alternative products or behavioural changes that render the items unnecessary.

Regulatory issues

The ACT Government has the power to regulate the distribution and use of products that are “given away” with a product as was done in the *Plastic Shopping Bags Ban Act 2010*. Such regulation would enable the Government to easily and quickly ban the use of products such as plastic bags of all thicknesses (including barrier bags, green bags and boutique bags), as well as products such as drinking straws, plastic cutlery and sauce containers that accompany take-away food.

The rationale for taking action on the sale of plastics would be one of environmental protection, therefore the ACT Government would also be able to regulate the sale of products more broadly under the Mutual Recognition Act with an exemption on environmental grounds. However, such an exemption would only be for up to 12 months under the Act.³ After this time, the ACT Government may need to make representations to COAG to discuss a permanent exemption. As such, it may be more difficult to regulate the sale of products such as bottled water, cotton buds, and plastic plates, cups and straws at the supermarket.

There is also an opportunity for the ACT Government to regulate how products are packaged for sale in circumstances where the products are packaged in the ACT, such as fruit and vegetables that may be sold in portions.

Consideration should also be given to reviewing any legislative obstructions that might result in consumers taking action to reduce plastics. For example, individual consumers have tried to take their own containers to the supermarket deli or takeaway food store to be filled, and have had inconsistent feedback about whether outlets are able to accommodate them due to potential health regulations.

The Conservation Council supports the ACT Government moving to restrict the use of single-use plastics provided by retailers for free at the point of sale, and would also support the implementation of bans on the sale of particular products that have a detrimental environmental impact such as bottled water.

Risks for business

Cost: For some businesses, transitioning away from single-use plastics could impose a significant cost if, for example, they are required to supply a more expensive product to replace the function of plastic products. When considering the range of single-use plastic products that be banned, the impacts are likely to be on businesses who have a high component of takeaway custom, or are solely takeaway.

The ACT Government could consider providing support to businesses through:

- incentives for businesses prior to regulating that drive the uptake of alternative products

³ Mutual Recognition (Australian Capital Territory) Act 1992, Section 11(3)

- a staged implementation that allow businesses to plan for increased costs and make adjustments in advance
- bulk purchasing and resale of alternative products, thus reducing the costs for businesses
- purchase of initial alternative products for reuse schemes, such as reusable coffee cups or takeaway food containers.

Drop in patronage: Some businesses may see a drop in patronage if they are not able to adapt to the new legislative environment by either a) introducing new products, b) introducing new systems to ensure customers can still access their products or c) increasing their prices.

The ACT Government could assist businesses by providing information and education to businesses about options for alternative products, where to source them, and information about schemes that might be available to participate in. Additionally, providing education to customers about why the alternative products are now utilised would greatly benefit business-consumer relationships.

Opportunities for business

Product innovation: The shift from single use plastics has already generated significant opportunities for small businesses that have responded to growing community awareness about the impact of plastic on our community and our environment. There are many and varied products that facilitate consumers transitioning away from plastic at home and in their businesses, such as beeswax wraps for food storage, silicone food covers to replace cling film, metal straws and bamboo cutlery, waste bins that don't require liners, reusable coffee cups of all sizes and materials, strong bags for shopping, and nylon fruit and vegetable bags to replace barrier bags. There is also significant innovation in the packaging sector where, under the National Packaging Covenant, there is an objective to ensure that all packaging is recyclable, compostable or reusable by 2025.

Regulation by the ACT Government to restrict the use of single-use plastics will inevitably provide opportunities for the product manufacturers to grow their market to meet the growing need of consumer demand for replacement products.

Systemic opportunities: some companies are stepping up with innovative ways to reduce single use plastics at a more systemic level. For example, the introduction of schemes that allows reusable coffee cups to be returned to the café the next visit in exchange for another reusable coffee cup (www.greencaffeen.com.au).

Such a scheme could also be considered for takeaway food containers for cafés, restaurants and other food outlets. While some takeaway food outlets may shift to alternative products, there could be merit in considering different models with regards to serving food, such as outlined by the Institute for Sustainable Futures when considering a scheme for the Sydney CBD:

- a 'decentralised system' where customers return their containers to the food court which owns and cleans the containers
- a 'centralised system' where a cleaning service provider collects used containers from collection bins around the CBD and takes them to a centralised cleaning facility

- a 'KeepContainer' system where the customer owns and cleans the container (similar to the KeepCup coffee cup). This could benefit from a direction about standardised sizes so that retailers have some conformity around portion size and price.

The ACT Government could give consideration to supporting such enterprises to ensure the mass uptake of products and /or to assist such enterprises to become viable.

Circular Economy: In establishing a genuine circular economy there will likely be opportunities for local businesses to develop recycling and reuse industries.

One such opportunity for the ACT Government to explore is the recycling and reuse of soft plastics. Currently this is occurring on a small scale through the “Redcycle” scheme, which collects soft plastics for use in recycled street furniture. Redcycle collection points are located at major supermarkets across the country, including in the ACT, and are then collected for processing in Victoria. However, few people engage in the Redcycle scheme, despite soft plastics forming a significant part of the waste stream. In the short term, Redcycle collection points could be increased across the city, but in the longer term the ACT Government should investigate the feasibility of establishing a soft plastics recycling facility in the ACT, with products generated being utilised in the Territory.

The ACT Government will also need to investigate effective waste management for biodegradable waste, such as the FOGO or municipal composting system which can capture and use excess methane through anaerobic digestion and the creation of biogas. The possibility of substituting plastic bags with biodegradable bags puts this issue squarely in consideration when planning a strategy for single-use plastics, as biodegradable bags may offer a better choice under circumstances when a bag is absolutely required. The use of industrially compostable plastic packaging could be adopted for targeted applications such as garbage bags for organic waste, fast food enterprises, canteens and other closed systems, where there is a low risk of mixing with the mixed recycling stream.

Impacts of the phase-out of single use plastics on the community

As with implementation of any policy, the Conservation Council acknowledges and supports work by Government that ensures policies are applied equitably and address social equity concerns.

As was demonstrated by the debate around the use of straws for some people with a disability, it is not always easy for policy makers to predict the impact on all members of the community without lived experience. However, in consultation, as issues arise, the Conservation Council would encourage the ACT Government to note representations from stakeholders who may have specific concerns with changing availability of specific products.

As outlined at the beginning of this submission, plastic bags and containers play a significant role in improving convenience for users, whether it is for carrying six bags of shopping from the supermarket to the car, or for grabbing a quick coffee on the go. Some members of the community will be initially challenged by lower availability of single use plastic products, and will inevitably be frustrated. However, the environmental benefits of cutting plastic use should be kept front of mind when being measured against the small inconvenience caused.

The ACT Government should support the community by providing information on other options that are available, for example for shoppers to undertake their weekly shop. Methods to assist community take up of alternative products could include: a demonstration of shopping trips using reusable net barrier bags and groceries in a box or basket, government run “how to” workshops, stalls explaining and showing consumers how to use alternative products, increased availability of alternative products such as net produce bags for purchase and the instillation of bag stations where consumers can reuse other people’s plastic bags.



ACT Government action to reduce its use of single-use plastic products

Procurement: ACT Government operations are likely to have a significant component of single-use plastic consumption across a number of sectors. By shifting procurement towards plastic-free products in its own operations, the ACT Government could significantly influence the market for plastic alternatives. This would include products for the operation of government, but should also extend to ACT Government funded events and programs. Procurement guidelines for Government should rule out the items identified at the start of this submission as needing to be phased out.

Other sectors: The ACT Government could play a significant role in reducing single use plastics in its own facilities across the Territory, putting in place policies the guide usage and procurement, but also undertake systematic reviews within specific sectors, such as education or health. It was recently reported⁴ that the hospitals are responsible for large quantities of single-use plastics and that much of the waste generated is going to landfill. The Canberra Hospitals Waste Management Plan 2017 could be updated and practices could be reviewed with a view to reducing single use plastic consumption in such a way as not to impact on patient care. Schools, the prison, government departments and other healthcare facilities could also start to challenge the use of plastics in everyday contexts. Taking action within Government could also drive non-government and industry sectors to review their practices.

Regulation of practices within other service industries

The ACT Government should give consideration to reviewing and regulating practices in other service industries that engage in activities where single use plastics are heavily used. potential sectors include the aged-care sector, the child care sector, non-government schools, and dentists and vets.

⁴ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-07-13/war-on-waste-hospital-waste-australia-recycling/11306376>