

## **Recycling is not uneconomic**

By Nick Cater, The Australian, 3 October 2017

We are indebted to the compilers of the ABC website for the do's and don'ts of recycling plastic.

On no account should “scrunchables” — the technical term for plastic bags — be sent for processing since they get caught in the conveyor belt, which has to be stopped to allow the operators to cut them out.

Punnets and takeaway containers are acceptable, but not the ones made of polystyrene. Plastic bottles can be recycled, but only after the lid has been removed. Whoever said planet-saving was simple?

Kerbside recycling is yet another guilt-assuaging eco-fad that on close examination turns out to be economic garbage. It is an exercise in futility that is increasing, not reducing, pollution and doubling the cost of waste disposal. Consumers are carefully sorting out plastic no one wants to buy; glass bottles are being crushed and dumped in landfill because it is too expensive to transport them; and the market for recovered mixed paper is saturated.

In July the Chinese government stepped up its campaign against *yang laji* — foreign garbage — announcing that imports of unsorted paper, most types of recovered plastic and textiles would stop at the end of the year.

Since 85 per cent of plastic recycling has been carried out in China, and since no other country has the capacity to take up the slack, the trade is effectively over.

Five days before the ban was announced, a bale of plastic caught fire at the Coolaroo SKM Recycling factory in suburban Melbourne, where plastic and paper mountains steadily have been building up. Fire crews fought the blaze for 11 days as a cloud of acrid smoke blanketed surrounding suburbs and the ambulance service told parents to take their children and flee. It was the third fire at the plant this year.

In February a similar blaze broke out at the Suez recycling plant in Chullora, western Sydney, and took 120 firefighters and 24 firetrucks to bring it under control.

China's decision to lock out First World garbage has triggered the green equivalent of a global recession. Yet the fantasy of a “circular economy” with closed material and energy loops refuses to die. “Keep on recycling!” urged the cheery folk at Planet Ark late last month. “Glass, aluminium, paper and plastic are too valuable to send to landfill!”

We should impose import levies on cheap glass and plastic, pass laws to mandate recycled content and introduce “market incentives”, otherwise known as subsidies. Planet Ark? Planet Stark Staring bonkers.

For an advanced look at this green dystopia, we turn once again to South Australia, the subsidy state, where no environmental thought bubble is too foolish to be heard.

In 2006 the state government gave \$250,000 to Plastics Granulating Services and another \$250,000 to a consortium the recycling company partly owned.

In November 2015 the company received another \$100,000 from the government to help it “create jobs in the state’s clean, low-carbon economy”. In March the state’s Climate Change Minister, Ian Hunter, stumped up a further \$300,000 “to create more jobs and opportunities for South Australians”. In June the company went into liquidation, putting 35 people out of work. Managing director Stephen Scherer said the price of electricity had crippled his business.

Since it doesn’t make economic sense to recycle plastic in Australia, with or without subsidies, and since China is pulling out of the business, a responsible local government, if there were such a thing, would stop kerbside plastic collection forthwith. State government bodies, such as Victoria’s Metropolitan Waste and Resource Recovery Group, should stop touting for business, instead of throwing good money after bad with yet another feasibility study “to recover resources from priority non-organic material streams such as plastics”.

Waste plastic is safer buried in landfill. Just ask the residents around the Coolaroo plant who are still cleaning up the ash from their properties and keeping windows open to remove the toxic stink.

The circular economy doesn’t come cheap. In March 2002 New York mayor Michael Bloomberg proposed an 18-month moratorium on recycling glass, plastic and aluminium, a move he said would save the cash-strapped city \$US57 million. Recycling waste costs New Yorkers \$US240 a ton (\$305 a tonne), twice the cost of landfill.

Kerbside recycling “almost invariably increases the financial costs of waste management”, the Productivity Commission concluded in 2006. The business case rests on its ability to deliver upstream external benefits, like reducing litter, but these challenges are better solved with targeted measures, says the commission, rather than through waste management policy.

The commission was equally sceptical about container deposit legislation, pioneered in SA (where else?) and about to be introduced in NSW, Western Australia and the ACT. The commission says the program is “unlikely to be the most cost-effective mechanism for achieving its objectives of recovering resources and reducing litter”.

The commission was less than enthusiastic about banning single-use plastic bags, a craze that began in SA (of course) and is rapidly sweeping the nation.

Plastics bags make up roughly 0.2 per cent of total solid waste added to landfill measured by weight. Their environmental impact in landfill is positive since plastic is inert and acts as a stabiliser. Landfill sites are, for the most part, old mines and quarries, and thanks partly to the mining boom, we’re opening up holes faster than we can fill them.

The bottom line is that kerbside recycling has failed as an economic proposition. It is a burden on ratepayers with little tangible benefit. The single exception to the recycling nightmare is aluminium, which requires 96 per cent less energy to recycle than to manufacture and has a large value to weight ratio. But it’s nuts to collect them this way, mixed up with un-recyclable trash.

Religion can be comforting, of course. For some, the weekly separation of bin waste serves as a civic act of spiritual atonement for the consumer lifestyle, and a way to impress one’s virtue on the neighbours. Yet why waste fuel and manpower collecting small quantities of mixed stuff for which the market is trashed? Surely they can find simpler ways of throwing away our money?

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