



Department of Planning, Industry and Environment

New South Wales Plastics Action Plan

June 2021

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New South Wales Plastics Action Plan

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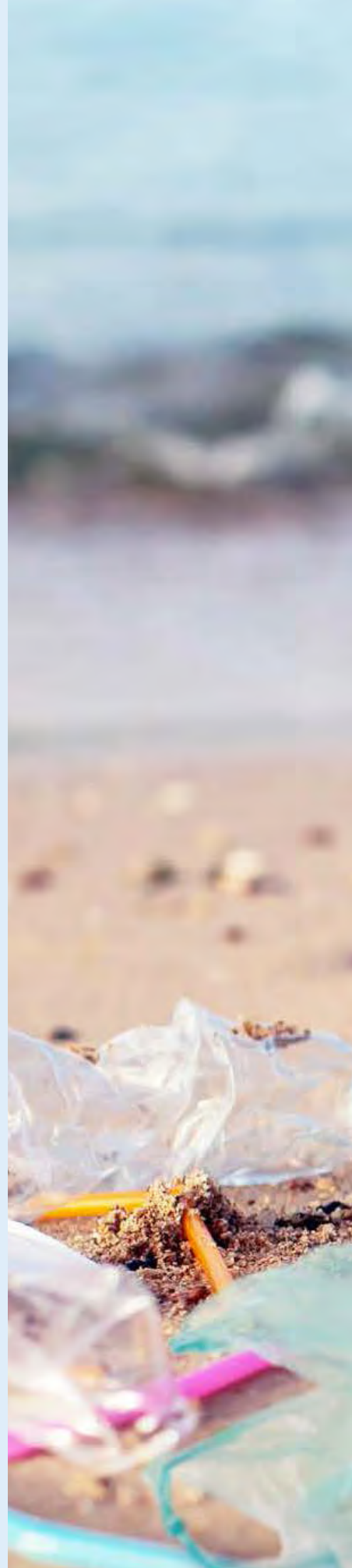
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Introduction

Plastic plays an important role in our society. It is cheap, light and durable and is an essential component to so many of the items we rely on today – from life-saving medical supplies to consumer goods like clothing and electronics.

While plastic is versatile, it's also increasingly threatening our natural environment. Hundreds of millions of plastic items are being littered each year, polluting our neighbourhoods, bushland and beaches, and harming our wildlife. Once in our rivers and oceans, plastic can be consumed by wildlife such as fish, birds and turtles, often injuring or killing them. Other plastic accumulates in large quantities, such as in the 'Great Pacific Garbage Patch', slowly degrading and releasing harmful emissions into the atmosphere. Nearly every piece of plastic produced emits greenhouse gases at every stage of its lifecycle, contributing to our carbon emissions and climate change.

In March 2020, the NSW Government released a discussion paper, *Cleaning Up Our Act: Redirecting the Future of Plastics in NSW*. The paper outlined our approach to working with the community to better manage plastic throughout its lifecycle – from production and consumption through to disposal, recovery and recycling.

The discussion paper proposed four long-term outcomes to work towards:

Outcome 1

Reduce plastic waste generation

Outcome 2

Make the most of our plastic resources

Outcome 3

Reduce plastic leakage

Outcome 4

Improve our understanding of the future of plastics

This NSW Plastics Action Plan sets out the first six actions we will take to achieve these long-term outcomes. These actions are to:

1. **introduce** new legislation to reduce harmful plastics
2. **accelerate** the transition to better plastic products
3. **support** innovation
4. **tackle** cigarette butt litter
5. **reduce the risk** of nurdles (small pellets used to manufacture plastic products) entering the environment
6. **support** plastics research.

The actions address each point in the lifecycle of plastics. They not only deal with activities like recycling and litter prevention, but also focus new attention on the points of production and supply, stopping plastic waste before it becomes a problem.

Under the NSW Waste and Sustainable Materials Strategy: Stage 1 2021–2027, NSW has adopted several targets. The actions outlined in this plan will help us to meet these targets, including to:

- **phase** out problematic and unnecessary plastics by 2025
- **reduce** the total waste generated by 10% per person by 2030
- **achieve an average 80% recovery rate** of resources from all waste streams by 2030
- **significantly increase the use of recycled content** by government and industry
- **reduce plastic litter** items by 30% by 2025
- **reduce the overall litter** by 60% by 2030
- **triple the plastics recycling rate** by 2030.



More than
5 billion

containers have been returned in the 'Return and Earn' scheme across NSW

What we heard during consultation

In response to a discussion paper, we received more than 16,000 submissions from the public and key stakeholders including retailers, peak bodies, councils and community groups.

There was generally strong support for the priorities we set out in the discussion paper, particularly for our plans to phase out single-use plastics.

We also received constructive feedback from stakeholders and have incorporated this into the action plan. Where possible, we have accounted for issues like national consistency, how achievable our goals or targets are within the desired timeframes, the availability of alternatives to particular items, and the need to work closely with many stakeholders.



Outcome 1: Reduced plastic waste generation

Action 1 Introduce new legislation to reduce harmful plastics

Phase out single-use plastics

Many businesses and households have taken voluntary action to avoid single-use plastics. There have been some significant reductions, most notably in the shift away from lightweight shopping bags by some major retailers and supermarkets. However, other single-use plastic items remain in circulation and continue to pose a threat to our environment.

NSW will introduce legislation to enable the phase out of some of the most littered plastic items (see Table 1). This list is in line with items agreed to by

the federal, state and territory governments at the April 2021 Environment Ministers Meeting.

The items proposed for immediate phase out will stop almost 2.7 billion items of plastic litter from entering our natural environment and waterways over 20 years.

In nominating these items, we have considered the availability of sustainable alternatives and the costs of transition for businesses and consumers. Compostable plastic alternatives may be available for some items, but these items only break down in industrial composting facilities. Given these items are highly littered and unlikely to be disposed of at the appropriate composting facilities, compostable plastic alternatives for those item will also be phased out.

We will ensure there are appropriate exemptions in place to allow people with a disability or other special needs who rely on plastic straws to continue to access these items for personal use. We will also run a range of education and behaviour-change campaigns to support consumers and business during the transition.

Single-use plastic items not scheduled for phase out remain of concern. Plastic bowls, cups and heavyweight plastic bags are significant contributors to the litter stream and items such as barrier bags remain problematic. Government and industry need to do more work to ensure sustainable alternatives are widely available. We will review these items and the available alternatives in 3 years to determine whether a phase out is appropriate at that time.

Major retailers have flagged their intention to pursue a national, voluntary phase out of heavyweight bags using virgin plastic over the next 2 to 3 years and we will monitor the success of this action before determining whether a future mandatory phase out is needed.



Table 1. Timetable for phasing out the most littered plastic items

| Phase out period (from passage of legislation) | Single-use and problematic plastic items |
|---|--|
| 6 months | Lightweight shopping bags |
| 12 months | Plastic straws Plastic stirrers Plastic cutlery Expanded polystyrene food service items Cotton buds with plastic sticks Microbeads in rinse-off personal care and cosmetic products |
| Review in 3 years | Plastic bowls (including lids) and plates Plastic cups (including lids) Oxo-degradable plastics Fruit stickers (non compostable) Heavyweight plastic shopping bags Barrier/produce bags |

Set design standards to limit the impact of harmful plastics

The NSW Government will lead the nation in establishing a new legislative framework to set design standards to tackle harmful and problematic plastics. The first design standard will phase out microbeads in cosmetic and personal care items over a period of 12 months from the passage of legislation.

Microbeads are used in a variety of products ranging from beauty products, paints, industrial detergents, cleaning products, as well as products used in the oil and gas industry. Microbeads enter our waterways through our drains, causing harm to wildlife and the environment.

While voluntary action has now phased out a significant proportion of microbeads in cosmetic and personal care items, we will create a design standard to ensure that this phase out is completed within 12 months from the passage of legislation. We will also consider expanding that design standard to the use of microbeads in other products.

Future design standards could be made under the new legislation to address other issues. For example, items with hard-to-recycle plastic often end up in landfill. Replacing them with easy-to-recycle plastic can keep them circulating through our economy. There are opportunities to drive the use of more recycled plastics, particularly in packaging.

Design standards could also address other potentially problematic uses of plastics like synthetic turf and crumbed rubber infill, which washes microplastics into waterways. Consistent consumer labelling can also help people make better decisions about the plastic products they purchase and give them guidance about the correct way to dispose of or recycle them.

Any future design standards would be subject to analysis of the environmental and economic impacts, consideration of any technical or performance requirements and extensive consultation with stakeholders. We will also continue to work with the federal, state and territory governments to make sure there is a uniform approach where possible.



The NSW Plastics Action Plan aims to triple the plastics recycling rate by 2030.

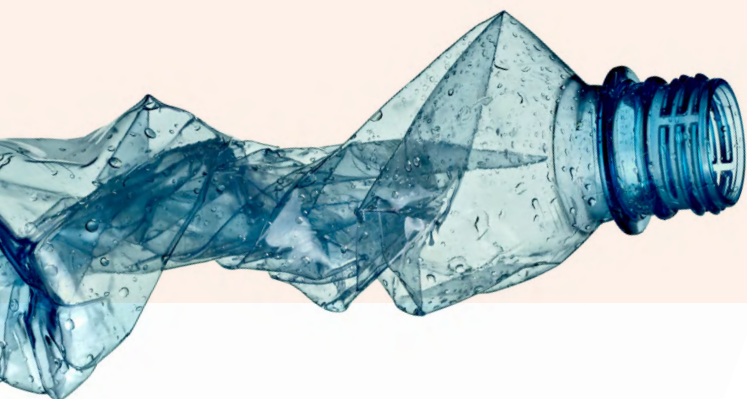
Making producers and brand owners of plastic packaging more responsible

In our discussion paper, we flagged the possibility of mandating a minimum recycled content in plastic packaging by 2025. Our preference is for industry to act before we look at regulation and we will be holding industry to account on the commitments they have made.

The Australian packaging industry, through the Australian Packaging Covenant Organisation (APCO), has committed to a range of voluntary national packaging targets. By 2025, the industry has committed to phasing out problematic and unnecessary single-use packaging, using an average of 20% recycled content in plastic packaging, ensuring all packaging is recyclable, compostable or reusable, and recovering 70% of all plastic packaging. While some companies have been leading the way, overall industry progress has been slow and more action is needed. We will work closely with the Australian Government and APCO to ensure industry meets or exceeds the set targets.

We will review progress toward the targets in 3 years. If industry has not taken sufficient action, we will consider mandating targets or design standards to address the issues. We will also require the packaging industry to improve reporting to the NSW Government on its progress against the voluntary targets.

We will level the playing field for packaging producers by requiring all eligible, non-APCO member businesses to also meet the national targets. This will ensure businesses who are doing the right thing and working towards the national packaging targets are not unfairly disadvantaged by 'free riders'.



Action 2 Accelerate the transition to better plastic products

Many producers and retailers have started to make the shift away from plastic or are moving to plastic that can be more easily recycled. We are also seeing more manufacturers and builders increasing the amount of recycled plastic they use. Consumers are demanding that everyday items such as hygiene products, sauce sachets and wrappers be plastic free.

This transition is good for our environment and our economy because it reduces plastic litter and the amount of plastic we send to landfill and it keeps materials in the economy for longer. It can also help to remove contamination from our recycling bins. However, changing production processes and using new materials can be costly initially and may need investment in new equipment or processes.

To help producers accelerate this transition, we will establish a \$10 million Circular Materials Fund to help with the costs of shifting from plastic to more sustainable alternatives.

The Circular Materials Fund will provide support to businesses like manufacturers, builders and retailers for projects that will:

- **reduce** the amount of virgin plastic used
- **reduce** the amount of hard-to-recycle plastics used
- **increase** the amount of recycled plastic in products.

Where possible, we want investments from the fund to be a catalyst for partnerships between producers, users and the waste and resource recovery sector. These partnerships will ensure decisions made at the point of production or supply have a positive impact throughout the lifecycle of a product.

Outcome 2: Make the most of our plastic resources



Action 3: Support innovation

Recycling technology does not always keep pace with new uses of plastics or new types of plastics that appear on the market. There are also some plastics that are typically difficult to recycle because of the way they are used – plastics in hospitals and aged care, for example, might require special methods of handling because of their potential contamination. The increased use of personal protective equipment during the COVID-19 pandemic has created more of this type of waste, with few viable recycling options available.

The NSW Government will provide up to \$5 million for trials and pilots of innovative ways to improve plastic recyclability, plastic alternatives

and the recovery of plastic. We will initially provide funding to address plastic medical waste, redirecting this waste from landfill back into the circular economy.

We will also support new plastics processing infrastructure through the \$35 million Remanufacture NSW initiative. Remanufacture NSW, jointly funded by the NSW and Australian governments, will provide money for projects that will increase our local capacity to turn our plastic waste into a valuable input for manufacturing. The first round of Remanufacture NSW funding opened on 22 January 2021.

As a further action, we will develop a new online portal to link NSW plastics recyclers with government procurement bodies to help boost awareness and uptake of products with recycled content.



Cleanaway recycling facility at Eastern Creek which processes Return and Earn recyclables.

Outcome 3: Reduced plastic leakage

Action 4 **Tackle cigarette butt litter**

Cigarette butts are one of the largest sources of plastic litter. They not only persist in our natural environment for many years, but they are often toxic and can wash into our waterways, usually through our stormwater systems.

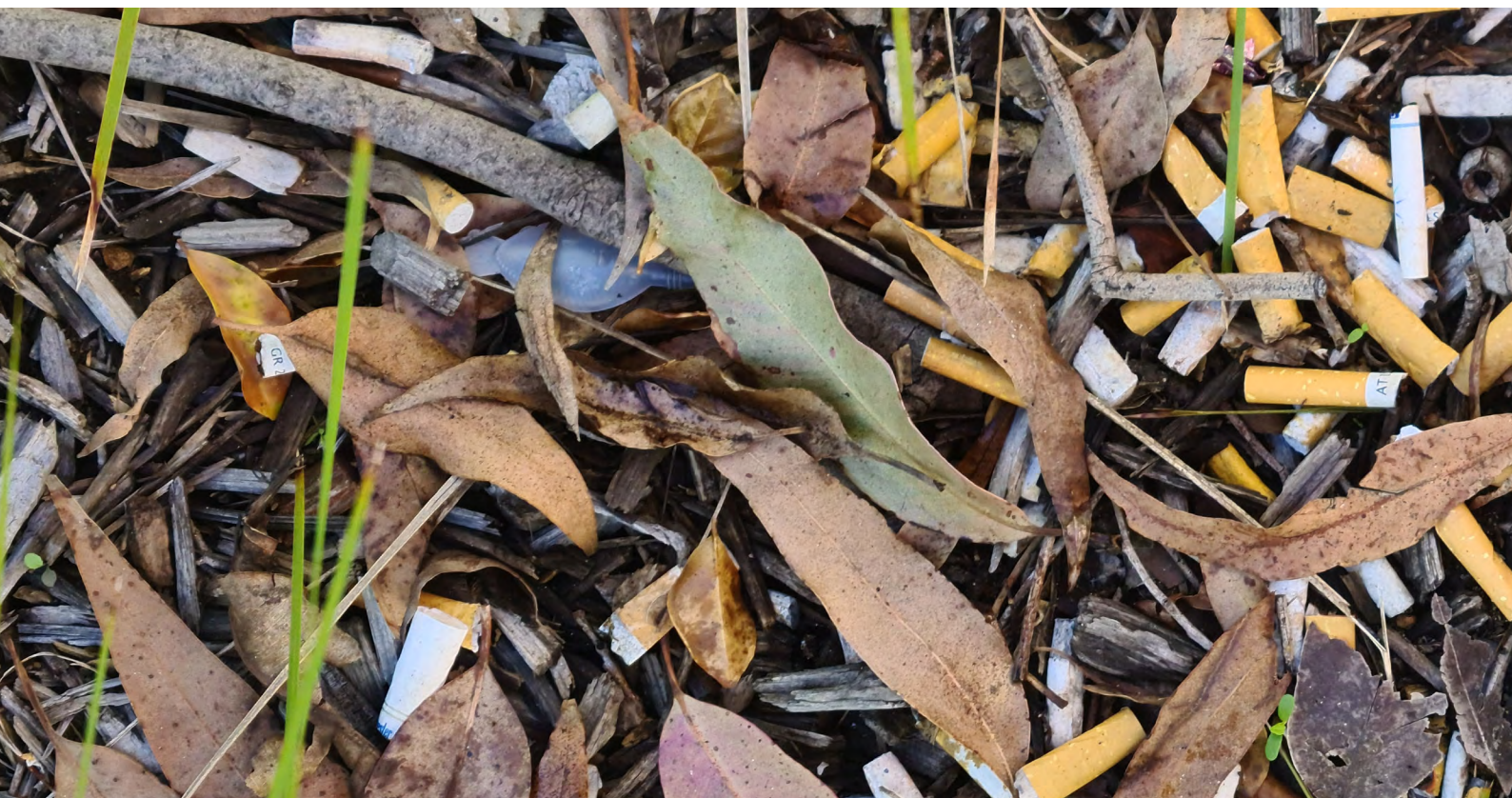
The cost of cleaning up cigarette butt litter is typically borne by the community, with the long-term costs to the environment becoming an intergenerational burden.

The NSW Government will investigate a new extended producer responsibility scheme that will make tobacco companies take responsibility for the litter impacts of their products. For example, we may set mandatory litter reduction targets that those companies must meet through a range of approved activities. This work will align with the Australian Government's recently announced taskforce on cigarette butt litter.

Action 5 **Reduce the risk of nurdles entering the environment**

Nurdles are small pellets of plastic resin used as a raw material in the manufacture of plastic products. Because of their small size, they are hard to retrieve and remove from the environment. Their size and appearance (usually clear) mean marine wildlife often mistakes nurdles for food.

The NSW Government will provide \$500,000 to help plastic manufacturers install systems to prevent nurdles entering our waterways. We will also provide guidance for councils that regulate plastics manufacturers about best-practice management of nurdles. This guidance will align with Operation Clean Sweep guidelines. Operation Clean Sweep is a global initiative to help plastics manufacturers collect and correctly dispose of resin pellets and flakes, so they do not flow into waterways.



Outcome 4: Improved understanding of the future of plastics



Action 6 Support plastics research

Plastic is a relatively new material. We know that the plastic produced today will exist for hundreds – if not thousands – of years, but we still do not have a full understanding of its long-term impacts on the environment and human health, or how to best dispose of, reuse and recycle it.

To help fill this information gap, the NSW Government will commit \$2 million for a new Plastics Research Partnership. The partnership will help drive research within NSW universities and research institutions to further our understanding of the future of plastics in the world. The aim is to make our state a leader in developing innovative solutions to manage plastic waste. The partnership will also conduct research on the impact of plastics, such as microplastics, on the environment to help fill gaps in our knowledge.



Tracking progress and monitoring the NSW environment

To ensure the NSW Plastics Action Plan is delivering results, we will capture, record and publish our progress towards the outcomes and targets detailed in this plan. We will participate in key state and national surveys to ensure we have the right data to monitor progress and refine our approach where required.

Studies such as the Australian Plastics Recycling Survey, Australian Microplastic Assessment Project (AUSMAP), Australian Litter Measure Index and the NSW Key Littered Items Study will allow us to see if our actions have been effective and guide decision-making about future actions.





By phasing out single-use plastics, we can help stop almost 2.7 billion items of plastic litter from entering our environment and waterways over 20 years.



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