

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

The Development and Expansion of Waste-to-Energy (WtE) Infrastructure in Victoria

Sunbury – Thursday 7 May 2026

MEMBERS

Georgie Purcell – Chair

Richard Welch – Deputy Chair

John Berger

Gaelle Broad

Katherine Copsey

Moira Deeming

Tom McIntosh

Evan Mulholland

Sonja Terpstra

WITNESSES

Jenny Saal;

Paul Ross; and

Chris Wilson.

The CHAIR: I declare open the Legislative Council Economy and Infrastructure Committee's public hearing for the Inquiry into the Development and Expansion of Waste-to-Energy Infrastructure in Victoria. Please ensure that mobile phones have been switched to silent and that background noise is minimised.

I would like to begin this hearing by respectfully acknowledging the Aboriginal peoples, the traditional custodians of the various lands we are gathered on today, and pay my respects to their ancestors, elders and families. I particularly welcome any elders or community members who are here today to impart their knowledge of this issue to the committee or who are watching the broadcast of these proceedings. I also welcome any other members of the public watching via the live broadcast or in the public gallery today. If you have not been here for previous sessions, you are more than welcome to be here in attendance with us. We are not used to such big crowds at public hearings, but it is considered a formal proceeding of the Parliament, so please, no interruptions, or it could force the session to be closed down.

To kick off I will get committee members to introduce themselves, starting with Mr Ettershank.

David ETTERS HANK: Hi. David Ettershank, Western Metropolitan Region.

The CHAIR: Georgie Purcell, Member for Northern Victoria.

Gaëlle BROAD: Hi. I am Gaëlle Broad, Member for Northern Victoria as well.

Tom McINTOSH: Tom McIntosh, Member for Eastern Victoria.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Sarah Mansfield, Member for Western Victoria.

Moira DEEMING: Moira Deeming from Western Metropolitan.

The CHAIR: Wonderful, thank you. Thank you so much for appearing before us today. All evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during the hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following this hearing, and then transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

For the Hansard record, could you all please state your full names and any organisation you are appearing on behalf of?

Jenny SAAL: My full name is Jennifer Saal, and I am appearing as a resident of Sunbury.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Paul ROSS: My name is Paul Ross, and I am appearing as a resident of Sunbury.

Chris WILSON: And my name is Christopher Wilson, and I am appearing as a resident of Sunbury.

The CHAIR: Wonderful, thank you. We now welcome your opening comments but ask they are kept to around 10 to 15 minutes to ensure plenty of time for discussion and questions.

Jenny SAAL: Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. I am here to strongly oppose the proposed waste-to-energy incinerator in Sunbury. My husband and I have lived in Sunbury for over 30 years. Our entire family is here, including our adult sons, our daughter-in-law and our six-month-old granddaughter Sadie. We love our Sunbury community, our abundant wildlife and beautiful walking tracks. Two years ago we built our home in the Sherwood Grange estate, which overlooks a reserve and Jacksons Creek. Close by is the Emu Bottom wetlands. This area is home to native wildlife – kangaroos, wallabies, wombats, birdlife and platypus. We are located just 7.1 kilometres from the proposed incinerator site, and that is as the crow flies. We are considered the lucky ones. Other new estates in Sunbury, as you have heard previously, are situated within just 2 kilometres of the proposed site. Had we known about this proposal, we would not have built here. Due to rising construction costs we cannot recover what we have invested if we are forced to sell. Studies have shown that proximity to industrial facilities, including waste incinerators, can negatively impact property values, and I greatly fear that this is going to be the case if this incinerator goes ahead for Sunbury.

My greatest concern is the potential health impact of this facility. My family has already experienced the consequences of exposure to substances once considered safe. My grandfather worked with herbicides and my father with lead-based paint, both later linked to serious health issues. They both died young from cancer, and our family continues to live with the long-term effects of that exposure. This experience makes it very difficult to accept assurances that emissions from waste incineration are safe. The proposed HiQ site sits along Emu Creek, which feeds directly into Jacksons Creek, which runs directly across from my street and the reserve and ultimately into the Maribyrnong River. Any contamination has the potential to spread beyond the immediate site and impact ecosystems and water quality.

When I first became aware of this proposal, I drew on my background in nursing and midwifery and turned to the research on waste-to-energy facilities. What I found was deeply concerning. The Paris incinerator biomonitoring conducted in the Paris region in 2024 by ToxicoWatch foundation identified elevated levels of dioxins and heavy metals in environmental samples near the incinerator. Public health authorities/advisories warned approximately 12 million residents not to consume eggs from their backyard poultry, due to pollutant accumulation. Elevated dioxin and heavy metal levels in nearby primary schools were found in the moss and soil in the playground of the local schools, which absolutely alarmed me. I looked into some other research. There is a study called ‘The health impacts of waste incineration: a systematic review’, which was done in 2020. It is in the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*:

A comprehensive systematic review examining 92 studies found that 66 per cent reported significant adverse health effects associated with waste incineration.

These findings, while varied in methodology and strength, consistently point to meaningful risks that warrant a precautionary policy approach, particularly where facilities are proposed near residential communities such as ours in Sunbury. The alarming findings for this were toxic emissions, dioxins and heavy metals such as mercury, lead and arsenic. The review found that nearby residents frequently exhibited elevated levels of these pollutants in blood, urine, breast milk and other biological samples. Importantly, exposure was not limited to air inhalation. The pollutants can travel considerable distances via air and environmental pathways, suggesting that entire communities, not just those adjacent, may be affected. There were increased cancer risks such as non-Hodgkin lymphoma; sarcoma; and bowel, lung and stomach cancers. Reproductive and developmental impacts included increased risk of preterm birth, congenital anomalies, increased heart defects, neural tube defects, facial clefts, renal abnormalities and reduced sperm count quality, including DNA damage, possibly increasing the risk of miscarriage. The evidence suggests that pollutants emitted by incinerators, particularly dioxins and heavy metals, interfere with fetal development and potentially disrupt hormonal and placental function. Respiratory, cardiovascular and other health effects: reduced lung function, associated with hypertension and high blood pressure – and I can tell you, as a person who suffered a major heart attack two years ago from tearing a coronary artery and having hypertension ever since and chronic health problems, that that also concerns me hugely.

Children living near incinerators have been found to experience higher rates of developmental delays, respiratory symptoms such as wheezing and general health complaints, including headaches, fatigue and abdominal pain.

Also:

There is some suggestion that newer incinerator technologies with robust maintenance schedules may be less harmful, but diseases from exposures tend to manifest only after many years of cumulative exposure, so it is premature to conclude that these newer technologies improve safety.

My other concerns about this proposed incinerator include Recycling Victoria granting 750,000 tonnes to be burnt at this facility when all of Hume has a fraction of this red bin waste and the ash problem, the extremely toxic by-product from the burn, which then needs to be either transported to another facility or stored and processed at HiQ. The traffic and infrastructure will be heavily impacted. Sunbury Road access from Melbourne involves crossing the historic Bulla Bridge, which was built in 1869 for horse and cart. HiQ's own proposal says that the truck route will be divided 50–50 between Sunbury Road and through the township of Sunbury. How is this even being considered – going past our schools, our childcare centres and our homes? The facility will consume enormous amounts of water at a time when we are facing increasing drought conditions. Where will this water come from?

The poor compliance record of HiQ concerns me greatly, and the climate impact and the contamination of our surrounding farming land. When many parts of Europe are moving away from waste incineration due to health and environmental concerns, why would we even be considering this? I beg you to think about your own families. Would you accept this facility near your home, near your children and near your grandchildren? I look at my granddaughter Sadie and I ask you: please do not make her future an experiment. Please say no to this waste-to-energy incinerator in Sunbury. Thank you.

Paul ROSS: Good afternoon, and thank you for giving me this opportunity. My name is Paul Ross. I have been a resident of Sunbury for over 40 years. My wife and I have raised our family here, worked locally and contributed to our community. We care deeply about Sunbury, its history, its people and its future. I am here to express my strong opposition to the proposed waste-to-energy incinerator at Sunbury. This is not a small facility. It is proposed to process up to 750,000 tonnes of waste each year and to be located within approximately 1 kilometre of existing and planned residential areas. That combination of scale and proximity is in itself a planning concern.

My concerns fall into four key areas. First, health: while modern waste-to-energy facilities operate within regulatory limits, those limits are not the same as zero risk. There remains credible and ongoing scientific uncertainty about the long-term effects of chronic low-level exposure to emissions, particularly for communities living nearby over decades. This is especially relevant for vulnerable populations such as children. The question before us is not whether emissions can be regulated but whether it is appropriate to concentrate that risk so close to where people live.

Second, environmental impact: the proposed site sits near Emu Creek, which feeds into the Maribyrnong River. This is not an isolated industrial zone; it is part of a broader ecological and agricultural landscape. Even with controls in place, waste-to-energy facilities produce residuals, including bottom ash and hazardous fly-ash, that must be transported, stored and disposed of. Any failure, however unlikely, has consequences that extend far beyond the facility boundary.

Third, waste outcomes: incineration does not eliminate waste, it changes its form. A significant volume remains as ash, requiring long-term management, and valuable materials that could otherwise be recovered are permanently lost. This raises a fundamental policy question: are we prioritising disposal or recovery?

Fourth, the circular economy: Victoria is committed to a circular economy, one that prioritises reducing, reusing and recycling materials. Large-scale waste-to-energy facilities require a guaranteed long-term feedstock of waste to remain financially viable. That creates a structural tension: these facilities depend on a steady supply of waste; at the same time, policy is aiming to reduce it. International experience shows that this can discourage high-value recycling and resource recovery.

Finally, community trust: many residents feel that consultation has been limited and reactive rather than transparent and genuinely participatory. For infrastructure of this scale and impact, social licence is not optional, it is essential. To be clear, the community is not suggesting inaction. We recognise Victoria faces real and urgent waste challenges, but solutions must align with long-term policy goals, minimise risk to communities and be appropriately located. Placing a facility of this scale so close to established and growing residential areas does not meet that test. Sunbury residents are asking for better planning, better engagement and better alignment with the principles of a circular economy. Thank you.

Chris WILSON: Good afternoon, and thank you for the opportunity to speak. Over the last eight months I have learned far more about waste-to-energy incinerators than I ever knew before, to attempt to find out how safe my family would be with one of these less than 5 kilometres away from our home. I am not a scientist or a lawyer. I am a dad that did some homework. I know that I could have written some parts of my submission more carefully, but that is the thing with a non-expert doing the digging – sometimes the terminology is wrong, but they accidentally stumble onto a concern that is right.

What I found made me suspect that this is a politically and financially convenient decision but not necessarily a safe one for the people of Victoria. My reasoning is simple – even with the best modern filtration, these facilities emit substances, chemicals and particulates that can be harmful when they build up. The amounts are initially small. However, these substances, chemicals and particulates, when released, will do one of three things: they do not break down at all or take years to break down; they take time, hours, days, weeks, sometimes months to break down; or they transform into something worse. So over time they accumulate, and they have the potential to be carried 10 kilometres or more by wind gusts and further again by waterways. This increases the potential for accumulation to the levels that could cause the environmental and health impacts I described in my submission.

One often cited study that I kept coming across was from the Small Area Health Statistics Unit at Imperial College London, which concluded there were no conclusive links between modern waste incinerators and health effects. The problems I had with this, based on what I have been reading for the submission, were it was an air-only model, so it did not account for what happens when pollutants such as heavy metals, chemical compounds and dioxins find their way into food and water sources. The headline said ‘no conclusive link’. In the authors’ own words:

The findings on birth defects are inconclusive, but our study design means we cannot rule out that living closer to an incinerator in itself may slightly increase the risk of some specific defects – although the reasons for this are unclear.

The observation window was far too short for the cumulative exposure outcomes, as these outcomes, especially from dioxins, come between 20 and 30 years. The language used does not rule out the cumulative impacts. The conclusion that the study found no adverse health effects of living near a waste-to-energy incinerator – what they meant is the parameters of this study did not find anything; the parameters were insufficient to draw the conclusion. If you do not study the cumulative effects of pollutants that are known to accumulate towards causing adverse health effects, you effectively have only studied a portion of the potential damaging effects that these facilities could have. At best it makes the claim of no adverse health effects dubious.

Studies in Spain, France and the Netherlands conducted by the ToxicoWatch foundation with Zero Waste Europe in 2024 and published in 2025 stand in contrast to the previous study and found high levels of these substances, chemicals and particulates near playgrounds, schools and homes, in drinking water and in food products like chicken, eggs and fruits and vegetables in the area in close proximity to waste-to-energy incinerators. The reality is you do not need a chemistry degree to understand that if a pollutant is known not to break down quickly or become something worse, no matter how small the quantity, it will eventually accumulate to levels that the emerging direct biomonitoring studies, like the ToxicoWatch and Zero Waste Europe study, are starting to find concerning. Companies overseas have been found guilty of breaching air quality standards, one in particular over 900 times. And the penalty – a fine, or a licence review if it is serious enough. What happens to the people breathing this stuff in or consuming it? I feel it is an unequal risk to the public versus the risk to the business, breaking the emission control standard.

The term ‘below regulatory limits’ is the floor, not a guarantee of safety. Those limits are calibrated to detect acute harm, not cumulative exposure over a 30-year facility lifetime. The science is still under active debate and inconclusive. Who will bear the risk while we wait for certainty? The answer should not be the families living next door to the facilities for 30 years. In 2024 it appeared that the Public Health Association of Australia shared this sentiment with lines in their reports such as:

... there has been insufficient time for health effects of newer technology to emerge, a precautionary approach to licensing and monitoring incinerators must continue.

...

New incinerators should be located away from areas of food production.

Food grown near an incinerator should be avoided.

And this one is from me: if it should not be near food, why on earth can it be near people or environmental arteries that are depended on by so much more than humans?

Sweden and Denmark acknowledge that waste-to-energy incineration is harming their recycling and circular economic efforts. Sweden's recycling rate has stagnated. Denmark is decommissioning facilities to improve recycling and reduce emissions. True recovery should be the recovery of resources, substances or chemicals that were used to create the item.

My submission is but one of many possible alternatives this inquiry will discover. It builds on what is already operating internationally, as I later found out after making the submission, and does not require destroying useful materials. They are not perfect alternatives, but they are a direction we could perhaps walk towards. With countries walking away from the path of waste-to-energy incinerators, should Victoria continue to walk down it? We took 30 years to learn the truth about lead, asbestos and PFAS. Who paid the price while the science caught up – regular citizens. My son is three; my daughter is six months old. In 30 years he will be 33 and she will be 30. I am here because I do not want them to be the next data point in another study about what we should have known sooner. Should we not apply the precautionary principle? Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much for that. We will move into questions. We have exactly half an hour, so 5 minutes each again, and we will start with Ms Broad.

Gaelle BROAD: Thank you very much. Thanks to each of you for participating in this inquiry, because it is really important that we hear directly from residents such as you. Just on a personal note, it is interesting for me because I have had family incidents similar to what you have gone through. I appreciate you sharing that today. I am interested in how long this issue has been affecting each of you. How did you get engaged in it and feel motivated to find out more?

Paul ROSS: I will speak first if I can. I suppose I really got my teeth into it probably 12 to 18 months ago, but in the back of my mind what was eating away at me were that the spoils that were dumped in Sunbury from the east–west tunnel project years before went through virtually unnoticed by a lot of the Sunbury residents, because it was done under the guise of the COVID restrictions and basically martial law that came under the Andrews government. It was pushed through without any consultation, and once it was there people just said, 'It's there; there's nothing we can do about it.' That was done with HiQ. I jump to the conclusion now, whether it be right or wrong, that the infrastructure is there for HiQ. It got there in a way that it should not have. But now, to compound the residents getting a slap in the face, HiQ are expanding on that by proposing a waste-to-energy incinerator. It is like 'We've got a foot in the door here. Let's go all the way. They've given us an inch. Let's take a mile.' That is why I got involved: because I did not want to see what happened with the spoils from the east–west tunnel going through virtually unchallenged, and I did not want this to go the same way. I wanted it to be challenged, and I wanted it to cease.

Gaelle BROAD: Thank you.

Jenny SAAL: I would say a similar thing. I was involved, not to this extent, with not wanting the toxic soil to come here, but unfortunately I think that was a done deal during COVID, and a lot of us were not made aware of it. It was extremely disappointing, when we had attended protests and tried to do as much as we could. We have been extremely fortunate this time to have some great residents that have let us all know about what is going on, because I must admit, as a resident, a lot of the processes that happen with this incinerator going ahead have actually been quite confusing to try and follow, so it has been absolutely fantastic having people like David to table our petition and take that to Parliament. I had never attended Parliament in my life until this incinerator proposal, and I had never spoken at a council meeting, which I did a few weeks ago about it. So I guess it just shows you how strongly I feel about it. But I basically found out from residents. An email – I am not even sure how I got on the list for the email – went around, with a few of the residents meeting at a cafe. I actually could not attend that day when they first met up, but then once it got going and we became a Facebook group et cetera I went along to the first meeting, and the more I learned about waste-to-energy incineration, the more alarmed I became about what is happening to our town.

Gaelle BROAD: Chris, I am just wondering, from your perspective – we have heard that there has been limited community engagement because a permit has not been applied for as such, but what are your thoughts? What would the impact be on this community if it did get approved and go ahead?

Chris WILSON: I would say devastating for not just the people of the community but the local environment as well. For me, being only involved for the last eight months, it was not because of HiQ's community engagement; it was thanks to the efforts of the No Sunbury Waste Incinerator group via social media that I heard about it. My initial reaction was purely just to look into it. I approached that in the same way that I do everything else – well, maybe if diesel emissions and things like that can be made safe with SCR-type technology, then maybe this can be too. The more I dug into it, the more concerned I became. And talking about the environmental impact, I think we do not actually realise yet, because the science is not conclusive yet, how bad this could actually get, not just for local wildlife, but if it makes its way into waterways it has the potential to cause a horrible impact for the people of Melbourne or wherever these facilities are located.

Gaelle BROAD: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Ms Broad. I am actually going to jump in there because you have gone into my area of questioning. I represent the Animal Justice Party, and I work really closely with the wildlife community in my electorate, which is very neighbouring, in the Macedon Ranges. Something that I hear consistently is the crisis that is occurring for native animals in Sunbury already, with rapid development and habitat destruction. I know that people who care for animals in the environment in this area already have concerns about what is going on. Could whoever feels, I guess, most knowledgeable on the panel tell me a little bit more about the concerns for wildlife and the environmental impacts that you think could come with the approval of this project?

Paul ROSS: I can tell you, where I live, which is not far from Jenny, over my back fence every morning there is a mob of kangaroos.

The CHAIR: Yes, same.

Paul ROSS: They are gradually getting pushed out through subdivisions and new developments. There are green wedges planned in those estates, which are going to give them areas where they can travel through the residential areas and into the vacant paddocks. There are cattle around Sunbury. There are horses. There is a very large horse establishment at Oaklands Junction, which is going to be in the path of the plume from the chimney. We have platypus in Jacksons Creek – one of the few places where they are still living naturally. The community and council have been very good in that the wetlands project down at Emu Bottom is a fairly large protected area, and we can run the dogs off the leash, but they coexist there. When I first moved to Sunbury, Sunbury's motto was 'City living, country style', and that has always been the attraction of Sunbury. It has got that country style but the privilege of being modern living. That country style includes all of the native flora and fauna that surrounds it that we want to keep. It is shrinking a little bit, but fortunately we have got the green buffer from the airport, which is getting eaten away a little bit, and we have got other buffers between here and Macedon Ranges. It is just a great place to live.

The CHAIR: And more broadly, in your view, are there concerns if this was to go ahead in Sunbury? I noted that in someone's submission there was a concern about the growling grass frog and other animals that are in the area. Is anyone able to speak a little bit more to that and of course, if possible, the way that that can have impacts on populations outside of the local area?

Jenny SAAL: I did not actually mention that in my submission, but I will say my son works in property development, and it is an absolutely huge thing in property development. If they find anything on any of the land that is going to be developed that suggests that there are any of the rare species of frog, there are massive things that have to be done to protect that species. So the fact that this incinerator is going to flow into Emu Creek and then Jacksons Creek and Maribyrnong River – I cannot see how it is not going to impact those populations. I am not sure whether anybody else knows about that.

Chris WILSON: Not about the animals specifically, but I will say that gaseous mercury, when released, if it finds its way into waterways, can become methylmercury, and methylmercury can stay in cells for a long time. In terms of the animals who make those waterways their home, they are likely to be the ones impacted first. We humans sit here and we are having this discussion now; they did not ask for any of that, and they will be the ones who first pay the price as the toxins build up in their cells.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much for that. I just have one more quick one. It might be for you, Jenny, because you mentioned it in your opening remarks. I am keen to hear a little bit more about the concerns about

impact on chronic illness. It is an area that I am very interested in. I have an autoimmune disease. No-one knows what causes them, how they start, but of course, environmental factors are considered to potentially be a part of that. Could you speak a little bit more to that?

Jenny SAAL: Just from my perspective, I have two children who are adults now, but as children they were extremely unwell with what you would call gut illnesses: chronic reflux, irritable bowel type issues. They were extremely unsettled and had learning difficulties at school. When I researched back through our family tree and found the links with the chemical exposure, the more that I read about that, the more I found that it was all linked back through families and intergenerational. The cancers in our family are becoming younger – you know, people are suffering from them younger and younger and younger. My aunty is the youngest in our family to be diagnosed, in her 40s. My mum has an autoimmune disease. The amount of herbicides that my grandfather had on him when he walked through the back patio at my nana's place would actually – if he touched the pot plants as he walked through after spraying the weeds for the council, the pot plants would actually curl up and die. She used to have to make him take his overalls off at the back door and walk through and then go and have a shower. You can imagine the effects of that building up and up and up over years. A lot of those herbicides have now been found to be quite dangerous. My husband's grandfather used to throw out DDT with his hands. They are all things that we were told were fine back years ago. Thalidomide, for example – women were told during pregnancy that that was fine to take until we started having all these birth deformities. That is my really big concern about this incinerator – that it is not going to be known until down the track and it is my granddaughter's generation that is going to be affected.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much for that. It is very interesting, but I know it is very personal, so thank you for sharing. We will move to Dr Mansfield, on the screen, if Dr Mansfield is with us – maybe not. We might go to Mr McIntosh then.

Tom McINTOSH: I will come off the bench. We heard before from Toxics Free Australia that you have started to explore other options to deal with waste – and thank you all for your very detailed submissions. Paul, you made a comment about recognising the need to deal with waste. We are all responsible for creating waste. We have heard previously from Toxics Free Australia from a community perspective. What is your view, having been doing your individual and collective research and discussions and conversations as a community, on how we deal with waste? Or what are you putting forward for the inquiry that the committee should consider? I understand, as residents, individually you are not going to perhaps have a cutting-edge scientific – but what is the community proposing to the inquiry?

Paul ROSS: I pre-empted that you would ask that question, so I will read you the answer. We absolutely need solutions, but they need to align with the waste hierarchy and circular economy principles. That means prioritising waste reduction at source, reuse and repair systems, high-quality recycling and organics processing, all of which have been expanded on by the speakers previous to me. Waste-to-energy may have a limited role for true residual waste, but a facility of this scale requires a long-term, high-volume feedstock. That risks locking in waste generation rather than waste reduction. The issue is not to do nothing; it is ensuring we invest in solutions that reduce waste over time rather than depend on it.

A lot of the things that were mentioned – we are not doing nearly enough in our recycling processes that we have at the moment. In summary, we have the organics and we have the plastics and we have the red bins. We do not have glass. The rubbish that goes into the red bins is quite often a mixture of stuff that can be recycled or reused. The products that we are buying from the supermarkets – there do not seem to be any regulatory constraints on how they are packaged. Quite often in the supermarket you buy something that is already vacuum-sealed, and then you put it in another bag to take it home. With the vacuum-sealed packaging we do not know what is in the plastics that are with them. Those sorts of things need to be regulated. And the question you asked previously about getting rid of some of these PVC plastics in the packaging – there needs to be legislation so that the packaging, particularly the plastics in the food sources that we get, all follows a common thread, so that they can all be recycled with confidence that they are not going to disrupt the sorting system down the track. Basically, at the moment, if there is any sort of downgrading of the plastic, the whole lot just gets thrown into the red bin type where it is going to go to landfill.

Tom McINTOSH: Given we have got 4 minutes left, I will leave it there, Chair.

The CHAIR: We are going to go slightly over.

Jenny SAAL: Can I just add to that? With the supermarkets it is exactly as Paul said. I was only looking the other day: Lebanese cucumbers wrapped in plastic and truss tomatoes in a little box – they box them with plastic over the top of it. Why are we putting these things in? We have done such a great job at stopping people from – when you come to the supermarket you have to bring your own bags or you have to buy a paper bag, but we have not done anything about stopping all that packaging that is being used in our supermarket products. The two big supermarkets I think are probably the worst at it. If you go into your IGA, they do not have things in those boxes as much and the plastic. I think a huge part of it is we have just become so used to everything being wrapped in plastic, and it does not need to be. Even when we go to the supermarket, taking our fruit and veggie bags with us instead of pulling off a plastic bag on the wall – there are simple things that could be legislated.

Tom McINTOSH: Can I just ask then, has this experience, do you think, led to community members being more conscious about the supply side –

Jenny SAAL: Definitely.

Tom McINTOSH: leading to people wanting to make individual or community-level changes to those supplies?

Jenny SAAL: It has definitely made me think about it.

Tom McINTOSH: Okay. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. Dr Mansfield, we will go to you.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you, and apologies. My audio is dropping out intermittently, so I could not respond earlier. Thank you for appearing today. This question can go to any of you or all of you. We are often told that the new facilities are built to a higher standard than old ones and that there is a significant reduction in the toxins that are produced by these and the emissions from them. Where approvals have been given by the EPA, they sign off and say, ‘There’s acceptable risk to the community.’ They believe that the emissions will be within acceptable limits and the companies will be required to meet certain standards. How much faith do you have in these approvals, the monitoring, the enforcement of standards and these assurances that are given about the level of risk posed to the community?

Chris WILSON: I will cover off on a little bit of that. First, I would like to say the words ‘acceptable risk’ should never be uttered if the cost is human health. From what I looked into with each of the filtration and purification technologies that incinerators have, none of them claim to eliminate anything other than PM₁₀ 100 per cent, or particulate matter 10. Ultimately things are going to get out, and we are not accounting for that, as I mentioned before, in terms of cumulative impacts. Perhaps the EPA needs to take that into consideration. I also think that the current mandates and guidance that the EPA are using are insufficient for waste-to-energy incinerators. I also feel that their mechanisms of enforcement are inefficient in the sense that they will carry out periodic inspections but they will largely require the incineration company to self-report, and as we heard earlier from Toxics Free Australia, the data does not always get produced. Sometimes the EPA may find themselves fighting with one hand tied behind their back. That is my opinion on that.

Paul ROSS: If I can just add to that.

The CHAIR: Of course, yes.

Paul ROSS: I do not believe that we have the technical expertise at the moment to justify waste-to-energy through incineration. It can never be zero risk, and it needs to be zero risk if you are going to put it near households, in the vicinity of a population. There is too much uncertainty on the long-term effects, and we are not going to know what they are for probably 20 years. It is too big a risk to take. Waste-to-energy is in direct conflict with the circular economy plan: the two just cannot exist together. One is destroying and the other is recycling.

Jenny SAAL: I would just like to add –

The CHAIR: Hold on. I will get Sarah to turn her camera off. Apologies, everyone. Sarah, I am not sure if you can hear me, but we lost you then. Can you just ask your question with your camera off?

Sarah MANSFIELD: Sorry. I was going to ask: further to that point about the circular economy, what would you like to see the state government doing to achieve a circular economy? If, as you say, waste incineration is in direct conflict with that, what should they be doing instead?

Chris WILSON: You go, Paul, if you want to go.

Paul ROSS: If you go on the internet and you look at circular economy, you will always see these diagrams where there are the different phases of the circular economy. Waste-to-energy is always lineal off that circular economy diagram. It does not fit into it. It has been added as if circular economy will get our waste management down to this stage but we are going to be left with this bit of waste that we cannot get rid of. All right we will push that out to the side and put that down as waste-to-energy. So you have got a circular economy on the one hand and then you have got by-products that you do not know what to do with getting chucked out to the side.

Chris WILSON: I was going to just add to that. With building roads or using it for asphalt or something like that, Resin8, I think, is the common term for it, or the way they classify it. It produces its own environmental impacts to make that, so to say that is circular is not really the case, because the fact is that once it goes into the road or the footpath, it kind of just sits there. It is not getting reused. It is not a true circular economy. It is still linear because you have just turned it into a road product. Technically it is being used everyday by people, but I think that is a technicality. Also, we do not know the impacts of how well that bottom ash, which is used to make this product, stays contained – you know, for what length of time. It may be part of the footpath or part of the road, but when does that deteriorate and what happens when it does? We do not know, so that is not something I feel is a viable option.

I was going to just mention some of the measures New Zealand are doing to tackle this exact question. They are phasing out certain types of plastic packaging. They are extending a ban on PVC and polystyrene food and drink packaging and mandating that produce labels, including the adhesive, must be home compostable by 1 July, 2028. They are setting up the waste minimisation fund to support infrastructure and other initiatives that are often community led to help divert waste away from landfills. They are standardising – this was in 2022 – household recycling with regard to the collected materials, including the kerbside food scrap collection, which we do as part of our green waste I believe; partnering and collaborating with businesses to reduce and manage commercial waste; and funding councils to remediate contaminated sites they own or on behalf of landowners through a contaminated sites and vulnerability landfill fund to reduce the risk to human health and the environment posted by legacy contaminated sites. They are funding this through the waste disposal levy.

In terms of what Victoria could do initially, part of my proposal would be to have a mandatory extended producer responsibility levy, expand on the container deposit scheme and introduce a retailer take-back obligation. That would be over the first couple of years, and many companies already have their own recycling initiatives. This would lead into a potential either government-led or coordinated by a third-party initiative to send the waste from households back to those companies already doing the recycling. It is just connecting the households through to those companies without the consumer – it is essentially reducing the friction or reducing the ceiling for buy-in from everyday people so that people end up sending whatever waste they have back to the relevant companies. That would require some sort of – I sort of go into it a little bit in my submission – bin system to sort that waste and even potentially, following along from the container deposit scheme, introducing incentives for people to do that and incentives for companies to join.

Gaëlle BROAD: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much. Thanks, Dr Mansfield. We will finish with Mr Ettershank. Mrs Deeming has advised she will submit questions on notice.

David ETTERS HANK: Firstly, thank you so much for coming in. It has been fantastic to get that personal experience, and Christopher, citizen scientist of the year, I would say. Fantastic. Could I ask you about the degree to which you have been consulted or provided with information? Because you have all become very knowledgeable on this subject, that is obvious, but I guess then the first question would be to what degree have you received any information or you have been consulted by any government agencies or departments or EPA or any of the regulatory authorities or even your local, state or federal members? Has there been any consultation or information provided?

Jenny SAAL: No.

David ETTERS HANK: Perhaps I will just go and work up the table. Jenny?

Jenny SAAL: No, none.

David ETTERS HANK: None at all.

Jenny SAAL: There has only been – I have attended a HiQ meeting online, and in my mind it did not really address our concerns at all.

David ETTERS HANK: I will come back to HiQ if I could. We will come to that, okay?

Jenny SAAL: Yes. No government feedback at all.

David ETTERS HANK: Thank you.

Paul ROSS: Same – there has been no council information, no government department information. Once again, HiQ did a Q and A after their online meeting where you were invited to send in any questions that you had, but that was being informed rather than being engaged.

David ETTERS HANK: Okay. Chris?

Chris WILSON: I cannot say. It took time for our local member to respond to my questions, and essentially it amounted to ‘They will be answered at the inquiry’, which I did not find sufficient, so I did this, which I really should not have had to. In terms of the EPA, the EPA sent out an email requesting feedback – I think it was just a generic email to anyone who had contacted the EPA in the last 12 months – for things that they could do better. For those who do not know, I believe my daughter is in the room. She is six months old, so I have been otherwise occupied. Responding to that email because I had to – I was obviously helping out there and doing this.

David ETTERS HANK: Was that an email specifically about the incinerator, or was it following on from the pile of rubbish?

Chris WILSON: Not specifically. I believe it was just generic. I think that they generically sent that out to anyone who emailed the EPA in the last 12 months.

David ETTERS HANK: Right. Can I then move on to the question of information that has been provided by HiQ and the sense to which you feel that provided you with clarity or value as to the process? Again, Jenny, would you like to kick off?

Jenny SAAL: The main thing that I got information from regarding HiQ was the document that they put out after it, a very long, wordy document with information. It did actually have questions answered at the end of it, but I definitely did not feel that they addressed our concerns and definitely not the health concerns. I guess I am very cynical, having seen their record for breaches since they have had the soil disposal facility, and also the fact that they have changed their name, which always makes me think that people cannot look up Hi-Quality anymore because they are now HiQ, so you miss some of the things online. But the concerns regarding health et cetera have all been either what I have heard from our group of concerned citizens or what I have researched online myself.

David ETTERS HANK: Thank you.

Paul ROSS: I have been in contact with HiQ over the past 12 months. A lot of the questions that I asked were in relation to traffic management and the effect of the increased number of trucks going to and from the facility and what that was going to affect. I asked them about –

David ETTERS HANK: Can I say, just for people, you were looking at potentially a couple of hundred additional trucks every 24 hours. That was my understanding.

Paul ROSS: Yes. I also asked about the technical aspects of the incinerator, which we know basically nothing about. I also asked about the cultural management plan, which dates back to 2020. There were two

cultural management plans. For all of the questions that I had, there was the same answer: that those reports are in the works, and they will be presented to the EPA in due course.

That was sort of stalled when there was no application made, so everything has stopped because the standard answer now is there is no application, so there is nothing to see here. I wanted to know what was in the cultural management plan. The response I got was 'as they contain sensitive information such as Aboriginal site locations, registered place details, oral histories and cultural knowledge, these plans are strictly protected and are not publicly available'. I can understand the Aboriginal sites, because they do not want them to be vandalised, but registered place details, oral histories and cultural knowledge, I could not understand why that could not be released, because that would be an advantage to Indigenous people to have more knowledge about that site and why it is so important. But yes, report-wise, they all say the EPA will get it when they get it. You will be able to see it.

David ETTERS HANK: Right – we hope. Thanks. Chris.

Chris WILSON: In terms of hearing anything from HiQ, the answer is no. As I said, I found out about this eight months ago from social media. To be honest, even then, trying to track down other than the group updating when things would happen, I feel HiQ's engagement only found a portion of the community. It really did not reach everyone, and I am testament to that. I did read their second community consultation report, and quite frankly I tore it apart in my submission because there were a bunch of things it leaned on that, one, did not provide enough information, or I felt were purposefully not answering the question. But the rest of it is in the submission, so I will not go into that. I know we are out of time.

David ETTERS HANK: Thank you so much.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much for that. We are out of time. You might get some questions on notice from other committee members, and you will get some from Mrs Deeming. That concludes the public hearing, but I just want to say a really big thankyou for coming along and sharing your perspective and submitting to the inquiry as well.

Witnesses withdrew.