

Submission to Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into Waste and Recycling – Roslyn Aikman

Introduction

The Victorian government has an opportunity to be recognised as a genuine leader in managing resources and waste. The guiding principle in this endeavour should be favouring solutions that promote avoidance, reuse and repair before recycling. The ideal manifestation of the circular economy is a move away from the ‘take, make, dispose’ pattern of linear consumption to a progressive application of the waste hierarchy, where goods are kept in their highest and best use for as long as possible. In this paradigm, waste is seen not as waste but as a valuable resource. Only in this paradigm will we be able to disentangle economic growth from the consumption of resources, critical for planetary sustainability and prosperity. In this paradigm, waste to energy is not an economically nor environmentally efficient solution, and should only be used for absolute residual waste for which no other viable solution has yet been conceived.

There are roles in this transition for community, industry and government. At a community level, we must all become conscious consumers who understand the life cycle impacts of the products we use and are empowered to make environment-friendly choices. Industry, including product manufacturers and recyclers, must innovate to drive the solutions that will us to sustainably manage our resources. Government must set a framework that encourages community and industry to play their roles, but sending market signals that address the negative externalities of wasteful consumption. At its most basic this means allocating funding to what we want to see ‘more of’, and putting a price on what we want to see ‘less of’, in order to facilitate more efficient decision-making.

Positive steps have been taken

The Victorian Government is to be congratulated for decisions already undertaken and initiatives underway to promote more sustainable resource consumption. For example:

- The promotion of stable long-term planning environment under the State-wide Resource Recovery Infrastructure Plan (SWRRIP), which facilitates gap identification and investment certainty. I understand that Victoria is already seen by industry as a leader in long-term planning;
- Commitment to the development of a plastic pollution action plan and a circular economy policy;
- Bans for single use plastic bags, and on e-waste to landfill;
- Existing funding programs administered by Sustainability Victoria including the Resource Recovery Infrastructure Fund, recycling Industry Transition Support and Research, Development and Demonstration grants; and
- The transformation to Victoria’s environment protection laws that will take place once the new EPA Act comes into effect from 1 July 2020.

More attention and resources are required

However, I feel that the Victorian Government needs to do more, and that taking further action is desirable for the long-term sustainability and prosperity of our whole community.

First and foremost, government needs to design policies that focus on reducing waste that is generated in the first place. The focus needs to shift from recycling as a ‘catch all’ to recycling as a ‘last line of defence’. To do this, I recommend that government utilise the Sustainability Fund to:

- Make a substantial investment in waste minimisation, through a strategy that covers how Victoria will reduce its waste through education, leadership and services that promote conscious consumption;
- Introduce bans on problem materials, in particular unnecessary single-use plastics (e.g. take away containers, cutlery, cotton buds, plates and cups, straws, balloons) that have devastating effects on marine and terrestrial environments when littered, and are difficult to recycle;
- Introduce landfill bans for materials, such as textiles and organics, that could be recovered if government were to facilitate co-ordinated investment in economically viable collecting and processing infrastructure and end market development.

Next, where waste is deemed unavoidable, government must ensure that the framework exists to ensure that it is recycled wherever possible, or otherwise doesn't escape the recovery system and cause damage to the natural environment. I recommend that government:

- Starting in their own backyard, should stimulate markets for resource recovery by mandating procurement of recycled content (to the greatest extent that is technically feasible) for all wholly or partly State-funded projects including roads, roadside equipment, schools and other infrastructure;
- Extend existing successful grants programs for resource recovery infrastructure and market development; and
- Establish a new funding program to support innovative industrial ecology projects that will recover materials that would otherwise be sent to landfill (modelled on the NSW Government's "Circulate" program), capturing a broader range of projects that are not currently eligible for existing programs.

Finally, the Victorian government has a role to play as a leader in the national conversation. In national forums, I expect the Victorian Government to advocate strongly for:

- 100% recycled content in all consumer packaging;
- More mandatory product stewardship schemes that make manufacturers and distributors responsible for the end-of-life treatment of problematic products they produce;
- Harmonising recycling standards so households and businesses are clear on what is expected of them when participating in the system; and
- Harmonising landfill levies to remove perverse incentives to transport waste across State borders.