

Plastic Policies – the failure of consecutive governments to tackle recycling

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Executive Summary

Australia generates over 540,000 tonnes of soft plastic waste annually, yet less than 6% is reprocessed. Despite mounting environmental concerns and community pressure, consecutive governments have failed to implement cohesive, enforceable recycling policies.

This report outlines systemic gaps, evaluates pilot initiatives, and warns of the consequences of continued inaction.

Introduction: What Are We Throwing Away?

Plastics used in food and medical packaging are made from a range of polymers, each with distinct properties and recycling challenges:

- **Polyethylene terephthalate (PET)** – Found in soft drink bottles, single-serve water bottles, and IV bags.
- **High-density polyethylene (HDPE)** – Used for milk jugs and juice containers; more stable than PET.
- **Polyvinyl chloride (PVC)** – Common in blister packs for medications and tamper-resistant packaging.
- **Polypropylene (PP)** – Found in yogurt tubs, syrup bottles, and prescription drug containers.
- **Polystyrene (PS)** – Used in fast food containers, bakery trays, and plastic cups.
- **Other plastics (Recycling number 7)** – Includes multi-layered packaging like sauce bottles and large water jugs.

These plastics are often mixed with additives such as plasticizers, which can leach into food and pose health risks. While technically recyclable, their diversity and contamination levels make processing complex and costly.

Plastics used in food and medical packaging—such as PET, HDPE, PVC, PP, PS, and category 7 polymers—are ubiquitous and often mixed with additives that pose health risks. While some are technically recyclable, the infrastructure, policy, and incentives to do so remain fragmented and insufficient and lose public support in initiatives at grass root levels.

The Collapse of the RedCycle Scheme

The RedCycle soft plastics program, once a flagship initiative, collapsed in 2010 after accumulating un-processable stockpiles. Its failure exposed the lack of government oversight and the risks of relying on voluntary, industry-led schemes. The fallout has left consumers disillusioned and councils scrambling to manage the waste burden.

Fragmented Local Authority Schemes

Local governments across Australia operate isolated recycling programs with no centralised coordination. These schemes vary in scope and effectiveness, and many lack the capacity to process soft plastics. Without federal leadership, councils are left to navigate complex waste streams with limited resources.

Industry-Led and Voluntary: A Broken Model

Currently, plastic recycling in Australia is largely voluntary and industry-led. There are no mandates for producers to include recycled content in packaging, nor penalties for failing to do so. This regulatory vacuum has led to minimal uptake of advanced recycling technologies and a breach of public trust.

Recycling Technologies: Mechanical vs Chemical

- **Mechanical recycling:** Converts plastics into lower-grade materials, often used in road surfacing. It is limited by contamination and polymer diversity.
- **Chemical recycling:** Breaks down plastics at the molecular level, enabling reuse in food-grade applications.
Examples include Kit Kat wrappers being trialled for chemical recycling.

Despite their promise, these technologies require significant investment and policy support to scale.

Pilot Projects: Australia and Global Comparisons

Australia

- **Woolworths, Coles, and Aldi Soft Plastics Trial:** A new pilot launched in 2025 aims to reintroduce soft plastics collection with improved transparency and processing capacity.
- **NSW Circular:** A government-backed initiative exploring scalable chemical recycling hubs.
- **CSIRO's Ending Plastic Waste Mission:** Targets an 80% reduction in plastic waste by 2030 through circular economy design and innovation.
- **Established container recycling in South Australia.**
Run for over a decade the ability and knowledge in the community in recycling bottles and containers is a good example of successful translation into policy.

Global

- **Japan:** Operates a national Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) scheme, mandating manufacturers to fund recycling.
- **Germany:** Uses dual systems for household and industrial plastics, achieving over 60% recycling rates.
- **Canada:** British Columbia's Recycle BC program integrates municipal and producer responsibilities under a single framework.
- **UN Global Plastics Treaty:** Australia is among 96 nations negotiating a binding treaty to end plastic pollution, with scrutiny on packaging waste and imports.

These models demonstrate that coordinated, legislated approaches outperform voluntary schemes.

Impact Summary: The Cost of Inaction

If Australia fails to develop robust recycling systems:

- **Environmental degradation:** Plastics will continue to pollute oceans, soil, and wildlife habitats.
- **Public health risks:** Additives in packaging may leach into food and water supplies.
- **Economic burden:** Councils and taxpayers will bear the cost of waste management and remediation.
- **Loss of public trust:** Communities already feel betrayed by failed schemes and government inertia.

Recommendations

1. Mandate recycled content in packaging through federal legislation.
2. Establish a national recycling coordination body.
3. Introduce incentives for chemical recycling and penalties for non-compliance.
4. Fund research into scalable recycling technologies.
5. Engage communities through transparent reporting and education.

Conclusion

Australia stands at a crossroads. The failure of past governments to act decisively has led to environmental harm and public disillusionment. HOPE calls for urgent, coordinated, and enforceable policies to restore trust and protect our ecosystems.

Appendix: Sources

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