Cleaning Up Our Act: Redirecting the Future of Plastic in NSW

Discussion Paper - Overview
March 2020
This document provides a brief overview of Cleaning Up Our Act, a discussion paper outlining proposed actions to improve plastics management in NSW.

Cleaning Up Our Act: Redirecting the Future of Plastic in NSW

The first steps

Cleaning Up Our Act is the first step in developing a new, comprehensive approach to managing plastic waste and pollution in New South Wales.

The goal is to take action to safeguard human health and our environment from the impact of plastic, while minimising negative impacts for consumers and maximising the economic opportunities available.

We want your views on phasing out plastic bags and other single-use plastics, working with industry and businesses to better manage plastics, making major improvements to our state’s plastic recycling network and helping establish NSW as a centre of innovation for managing plastics. It is our responsibility to take the bold steps to protect our community, now and in the future.

We want to develop a whole-of-lifecycle plan (generation and use, collection and processing, end-of-life, and looking towards the future) that will make NSW a global leader in plastic management.

Alongside Cleaning Up Our Act, the NSW Government has released a discussion paper to inform the development of a 20-Year Waste Strategy. The 20-Year Waste Strategy will set the vision for how we manage waste in NSW. It will include measures that aim to reduce waste, increase recycling, plan for future infrastructure and create new markets for recycled products.

Cleaning Up Our Act will complement the 20-Year Waste Strategy with a focus on:

- **Sustainability** — plastic is valued and managed in NSW within a circular economy, delivering improved environmental and human health outcomes.
- **Reliability** — plastic is manufactured, reused, recycled, and disposed of with minimal disruptions in services and in accordance with community expectations.
- **Affordability** — plastic usage and management improvements are undertaken with the least adverse impacts on consumers.

The case for action

We need to take rapid and bold action on plastic, or risk otherwise preventable long-term impacts.

Plastic is everywhere. It has become a crucial part of our modern society. Global production of plastics has increased twentyfold since the 1960s, reaching 322 million tonnes in 2015: which is equivalent to the weight of water in 128,800 Olympic swimming pools.

We have so many uses for plastic but we do not get the most out of this resource and are allowing it to pollute our land, waters and air. Often plastic products are used for mere moments, but once disposed of they last for hundreds or even thousands of years.

It is estimated that 8 million tonnes of plastic leak into our oceans every year, equal to a dump truck a minute. These plastics cause injury or death to marine animals and can also concentrate and transport harmful chemicals. Plastic harms our ecosystems, contributes to climate change and poses a risk to human health.
NSW generates 800,000 tonnes of plastic yearly, but only 10% of our plastic is recycled. In NSW, there are an estimated 27 plastic items littered per 1,000 square metres and over 60% of the litter in our state is plastic packaging and single-use plastics. There is still much to learn about the long-term impacts of plastic.

We are facing a plastic pollution crisis that requires a comprehensive and bold response. This is not just about banning one product; this is about changing how our economy uses, re-uses and disposes of plastic.

**Plastic facts:**
- NSW consumed 1.1 million tonnes of plastic in 2017–18 (mainly packaging and household items)
- By 2050 there will be more plastic by weight in the ocean than fish
- Only 30% of plastic waste recycled in NSW is remanufactured here, with the remainder sent elsewhere for reprocessing

**What we propose to do about it**

*Cleaning Up Our Act*, sets four key outcomes, each supported by a proposed target and priority directions.

**Outcome 1:**
Reduce plastic waste generation

**Proposed target:** Phase out key single-use plastics

The best way to reduce plastic waste is to stop it from being produced in the first place. We can do this by focusing on the following:

- **Priority direction 1:** Harness people power to create a fundamental shift in the way we use plastic
- **Priority direction 2:** Set design standards for plastic consumer items
- **Priority direction 3:** Phase out key single-use plastic items

We intend to phase out lightweight plastic shopping bags (less than 35 microns thick, including those made from ‘degradable’ and ‘compostable’ plastic) and are considering doing so within 6 months from passage of legislation (while avoiding the Christmas and New Year period). This phase out will complement the other aspects of this strategy designed to support plastic recycling and reduce plastic litter entering the environment. The NSW Government will also consider phasing out plastic items and materials like those listed below:

- Disposable plates/bowls, cutlery, cups, stirrers and some other single-use food service items
- Expanded polystyrene food and beverage containers
- Plastic straws
- Heavier/boutique plastic bags
- Oxo-degradable plastics

The phase out will include consideration of specialist uses for some single-use plastics, like in hospitals where it is used to keep items sterile and for people with a disability who may rely on these items (such as plastic straws). Where there are no viable alternatives for these uses, exemptions will be considered.

**Outcome 2:**
Make the most of our plastic resources

**Proposed target:** Triple the proportion of plastic recycled in NSW across all sectors and streams by 2030

In NSW, we can retain valuable plastic resources and create new jobs by improving plastic recycling capacity. We can do this by focusing on the following:

- **Priority direction 4:** Make producers of plastic items more responsible for collecting and recycling in NSW
- **Priority direction 5:** Mandate 30% minimum recycled content in plastic packaging in NSW by 2025
- **Priority direction 6:** Support demand and industry capacity

**We’re developing a new, comprehensive approach to managing plastic waste in NSW.**
Outcome 3: Reduce plastic waste leakage

Proposed target: Reduce plastic litter items by 25% by 2025

Plastic ‘leakage’ is defined as litter and other ways that plastic pollutes our environment. When plastic waste escapes into our environment, it severely damages our ecosystems, reduces the appeal of our beaches, waterways and cities, and means that a valuable resource is lost from the NSW economy. To reduce plastic leakage, we can focus on the following:

- **Priority direction 7:** Use extended producer responsibility schemes to fund litter collection and end-of-life plastic management
- **Priority direction 8:** Invest in infrastructure that can better manage plastic before it causes harm

Outcome 4: Improve our understanding of the future of plastics

Proposed target: Make NSW a leader in national and international research on plastics

NSW has some of the world’s best research institutions, adaptive industry and an impassioned community. To ensure NSW is equipped to develop innovative solutions to current and future plastic challenges, we will focus on the following priorities:

- **Priority direction 9:** Set up a NSW plastics research network by 2021
- **Priority direction 10:** Support commercialisation of research-driven plastics solutions

**Next steps**

Feedback will be consolidated, considered and used to finalise the NSW Plastic Plan. A report on the public consultation will be made available.

**Have your say**

Government, industry and community all need to work together to clean up our state. Now is your chance to help set the direction for how NSW deals with plastic.


You can also provide written submission by emailing plastics.plan@environment.nsw.gov.au

Your feedback from this consultation process will be used to develop the final NSW Plastics Plan and inform ongoing implementation.
Tell us your thoughts

• Are you concerned about how much plastic we use in NSW?
• Do you think plastic is causing environmental problems?
• Do you think plastic poses a risk to human health?
• Do you support the NSW Government phasing out key single-use plastics?
• Are there other plastics the NSW Government should phase out?
• Do you support the target to triple the proportion of plastic recycled in NSW across all sectors and streams by 2030?
• Do you support the target to reduce plastic litter by 25% by item by 2025?

• Do you support a requirement for all new plastic packaging to contain at least 30% recycled plastic by 2025?
• Do you support business taking greater responsibility for the plastic they generate?
• What is the most important action the NSW Government can take to minimise the impact of plastics and why do you think this?
• What other actions do you think the NSW Government should take to protect our environment and human health from plastic?

Let us know your thoughts through the online surveys found www.yoursay.dpie.nsw.gov.au/plastics-plan.
You can also provide written submission by emailing plastics.plan@environment.nsw.gov.au.