

The National Waste Policy – just more words or will progress be realised?

By Rose Read

THE TIME HAS COME for governments to demonstrate real commitment to positive outcomes.

It's been over four months since environment ministers were presented a refreshed National Waste Policy (NWP), and over 12 months since ministers committed to respond to the China ban. Unfortunately, things happen slowly in waste policy circles.

For consideration at the time was the NWP and a Roadmap for Action. The NWP included five key principles based on circular economy thinking. The Roadmap included multiple targets, strategies and milestones; and role descriptions and responsibilities across all levels of government, industry and businesses.

The ministers agreed to the NWP principles i.e to improve resource recovery and reuse, build markets for recycled products, improve information to guide investment and strategies; but no Roadmap for Action.

Rather, the ministers reassessed their Roadmap goals - more robust targets and funding, support for industry development, increased demand for procured recyclables, a national approach to policy and regulation, and a coordinated approach to waste levies.

By the time this action plan is presented to ministers in August, it will be about two years since the China ban. There has been considerable talk, but very little action.

This reflects to industry that the government doesn't see waste and recycling as a priority. It doesn't appreciate the opportunities and benefits that would be delivered. Nor

does it care about the community disengagement it is creating due to lack of policy reform and action.

Progress at a national level is very disappointing. There is a complete lack of political will to urgently address these issues. The failure of environment ministers to sign-off on targets and strategies of the NWP illustrates their ineffectiveness to drive consensus across states and territories.

Despite the Department of Environment and Energy continuing its support in finalising the action plan, there's little evidence of changes to government procurement practices in creating markets, community education around contamination, or completing the product stewardship review.

This is not to say those in government agencies aren't committed to working together to address the issues. It just lacks vision, leadership and national coordination that is outcome-oriented.

With the next Meeting of Environment Ministers scheduled in August and the Department's product stewardship review running late, the rate of progress will continue to be slow and unproductive.

It is unsatisfactory from a government policy perspective and disheartening, as solutions exist. What's lacking is the political will at all levels to drive meaningful change. It raises the question, "What does it take to get our governments' attention?"

Stockpiles continue to grow, unprocessed recyclables are being moved from state-to-state, and state agencies are temporally closing MRFs due to licence breaches from the inability to move materials to local or overseas markets. Sadly, collected recyclables are

being sent to landfills due to lack of alternative options.

This is costing the country in many ways, including additional fees to councils, lost revenue and forfeited environmental benefits from non-recovery of recyclables. It's not an exaggeration to declare that Australia is going backward in relation to getting policy settings right.

We are losing the community's faith in recycling when they see their waste ending up in landfill. Community and business engagement in recycling is evaporating right before our eyes.

What needs to be done is clear. We need to quickly ramp-up action by appointing a national waste and resource recovery commissioner with the resources to implement the NWP.

We need strong enforceable targets for the next 5-10 years to develop and expand local markets. If producers do not meet achievable recycled content levels in their packaging, those products should not be allowed on the market. This could be implemented by amending existing container deposit regulations, or by creating new regulations under the Product Stewardship Act.

Australia urgently needs a regulated battery stewardship scheme as batteries are a major contaminate and source of fires in collection trucks, MRFs and stockpiles.

We need harmonised landfill levies to ensure that waste ends up in the right place. It should not be illegally dumped, stockpiled, buried or burnt when it can be recovered and reused.

Australia needs to remove disparities between state regulations, which drive waste to the wrong places.

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Rose Read believes there just doesn't seem to be any sense of urgency at either a Federal or state government level to progress change quickly.

Planning laws are important, and we need better laws to ensure space is made available for waste management facilities. Facilities need to be protected from urban encroachment and provided with adequate buffer zones.

Reinvestment of landfill levies is essential and must be directed into research and industry development to support collection and processing technologies that help improve the quality of waste for reuse.

Finally, there is a significant need for greater investment in community education. Multiple grey areas, incomplete education campaigns and confusing messages serve to undermine correct disposal habits.

While tools and approaches exist, there is a lack of leadership to take it forward. Australia needs to activate known solutions, which means governments need to demonstrate greater attention to measurable outcomes.

Rose Read is the CEO of the National Waste and Recycling Industry Council (NWRIC).



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