

# TRANSCRIPT

## STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING

### Inquiry into the Environment Protection Amendment (Banning Plastic Bags, Packaging and Microbeads) Bill 2016

Melbourne — 1 December 2016

#### Members

Mr David Davis — Chair

Ms Samantha Dunn

Ms Harriet Shing — Deputy Chair

Mr Khalil Eideh

Ms Melina Bath

Mr Cesar Melhem

Mr Richard Dalla-Riva

Mr Daniel Young

#### Participating Members

Mr Greg Barber

Mr James Purcell

Mr Jeff Bourman

Mr Simon Ramsay

Ms Colleen Hartland

#### Staff

Secretary: Mr Michael Baker

#### Witnesses

Mr Robert Skehan (affirmed), and

Mr Dale Martin (affirmed), Plastic Bag Free Victoria.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Thank you, gentlemen. We might get underway. I extend a welcome to Mr Martin and Mr Skehan. My apologies if I am mispronouncing your name.

**Mr SKEHAN** — No, that is perfect.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Terrific. We are hearing evidence from you today in relation to the Environment Protection Amendment (Banning Plastic Bags, Packaging and Microbeads) Bill 2016.

We have allowed an hour for this particular part of the hearings today. I ask you to provide a presentation and an overview of perhaps no longer than 5 or 10 minutes, after which time we can ask questions and get into the detail of the inquiry from there.

**Mr SKEHAN** — Sure, I would love to. First of all, thanks very much for inviting us along today. Dale and I are here to call on the Victorian Parliament to take action on the environmental devastation being caused by single-use plastic bags.

I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands on which we meet and pay my respects to their elders, past and present.

**Mr MARTIN** — My name is Dale Martin. I just want to note that I have recently been elected to Moreland City Council, but I am not here in that capacity today. I am actually here in my role with Plastic Bag Free Victoria. I will let Rob continue.

**Mr SKEHAN** — Thanks, Dale. Plastic Bag Free Victoria is an umbrella organisation that supports and is supported by allies with 90 community groups spread across Victoria, who are working tirelessly to reduce the impact of plastic pollution on our streets, parks, waterways, beaches and oceans. These groups are from all over Victoria, from Mallacoota in the east to Phillip Island and Torquay in the south, to Echuca in the north and Apollo Bay in the west. These communities are taking action every day to see the damage caused by plastic pollution ended in their communities and in their state, and they are supported in these actions by national environment organisations such as Boomerang Alliance — who are presenting next — Clean Up Australia and Take3, and international environment organisations such as Greenpeace and Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, who are all pursuing action on plastic pollution.

Plastic bags are totally unnecessary and block stormwater drains, entrap wildlife and kill hundreds of thousands of sea creatures and birds each year, who mistake these bags for food, causing a horrendous and painful death through starvation. These plastic bags take hundreds of years to break down, and because they are not biodegradable, they never fully go away. Even when disposed of through waste management systems, typically landfill, the plastic disintegrates over hundreds of year, leaching toxic chemicals into the soil, which over time enter the water systems. The cumulative effects of this can only be imagined.

Retails such as Coles and Woolworths distribute billions of these toxic plastic bags every year, with these toxic bags polluting our land and waterways and causing environmental devastation to our fragile ecosystems. Both Coles and Woolworths say they will continue to hand out toxic plastic bags while legislation allows them to, and they will continue to pollute our streets, pollute our parks, pollute our waterways and beaches and kill our oceans — because they can. Both Coles and Woolworths have made it very clear they will only stop handing out toxic single-use plastic bags when the government tells them to.

South Australia, Tasmania, the ACT, the Northern Territory and now Queensland, along with over 80 countries around the world, are taking action on the distribution of single-use plastic bags, something the Victorian Labor government committed to doing back in 2006. At that time, 10 years ago, in talking about a ban on plastic bags the then environment minister, John Thwaites, said:

This legislation will send a clear message that these bags come at an environmental price that we can no longer ignore ...

That was 10 years ago:

... plastic bags kill substantial numbers of whales, seals, turtles and other marine wildlife and can take up to 1000 years to break down in the environment.

To date, 10 years and over 10 billion additional toxic plastic bags later, further polluting Victoria's streets, parks, beautiful waterways and coastline, still nothing has been done. Former Liberal Premier Denis Napthine is

on the record as saying he should have taken action on single-use plastic bags while in power. It is now time for the Victorian Parliament to step up and ban the bag and do its part to stop this environmental disaster.

On 17 August this year Plastic Bag Free Victoria handed over a petition to Nina Springle on the steps of Parliament House containing the signatures of over 11 600 Victorians who want to see a reduction in plastic pollution through government action to ban single-use plastic bags. At the same time Greenpeace handed over an online petition to Anthony Carbines containing over 10 000 names also wanting to see action by the Victorian government on plastic pollution. Nina Springle and the Greens have introduced the Environment Protection Amendment (Banning Plastic Bags, Packaging and Microbeads) Bill 2016, which I will just refer to as 'the bill' if that is okay, which we are here today to support. This bill has been introduced by the Greens after 10 years of Labor and coalition inaction. The introduction of this bill is to reduce plastic pollution and reduce the impact of plastic pollution on our environment.

I would like to point out: good policy is good policy, and this bill in its intention is good policy. I would also like to point out that this bill has the potential to not only have significant positive impact on Victoria's environment but a significant positive impact on Victoria's economy.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Thanks very much, Mr Skehan. Did you have anything to add, Mr Martin?

**Mr MARTIN** — I was just going to read through a list of the organisations that we are affiliated with, and allies. So if you will bear with me a moment, I will just go through the list: Ban the Bag Phillip Island, Barwon Heads Sustainability Group, Baw Baw Sustainability Network; the beach patrols of the following areas — Albert Park, Altona, Aspendale, Brighton, Chelsea, Elwood, Frankston, Hampton, Mentone, Mordialloc, Parkdale, Port Melbourne, Ricketts Point, Rye, Sandringham, South Melbourne, Tootgarook, Werribee, Williamstown, Seaford, St Kilda; Beach Patrol Australia; Bellarine Catchment Network; Bendigo Sustainability Group; Boomerang Bags in the following areas — Apollo Bay, Avalon, Bairnsdale, Bass Coast, Bay and basin, Dandenong Ranges, Echuca, Fish Creek, Forrest, Healesville, Hobsons Bay, Illawarra, Lakes Entrance, Mallacoota, Torquay, Warburton; Bottle for Botol; Bye Bye Plastic Bags Australia; Colac Otway Sustainability Group; Emerald for Sustainability; EnviroCom Australia; Fishcare Victoria Inc.; Friends of Greenwich Bay; Friends of Mallacoota; Friends of Point Addis; Friends of Williamstown Wetlands; Geelong Sustainability; Gippsland Unwrapped; La Trobe Sustainability; La Trobe Valley Sustainability Group; Macedon Ranges Sustainability Group; Melbourne Farmers Markets; Melbourne Polytechnic/Marine Care Point Cooke; Mount Alexander Sustainability Group; North East Regional Sustainability Alliance; Plastic Bag Free Apollo Bay; Plastic Bag Free Ballarat; Plastic Bag Free Dandenong Ranges; Plastic Bag Free Daylesford; Plastic Bag Free Echuca-Moama; Plastic Bag Free Frankston; Plastic Bag Free Geelong; Plastic Bag Free Healesville; Plastic Bag Free Inner West; Plastic Bag Free Inverloch; Plastic Bag Free Moreland; Plastic Bag Free Torquay; Plastic Bag Free Warburton; Plastic Bag Free Yarraville Village; Port Phillip Ecocentre; Riddells Creek Sustainability Group; ScabDuty; Surf Coast Energy Group; Sustain Australia Food Network; Sustainability Gippsland; Sustainable Fawknor; Sustainable Living Maribyrnong; the Connies, the Rogue Ginger; the Sustainable Table; and the Werribee River Association. Thank you.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Thanks very much for that. I might start by just asking you about the way in which the alliance — I think it is around 70-odd groups that you just read out then.

**Mr SKEHAN** — Eighty-nine.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Eighty-nine. Okay.

**Mr SKEHAN** — And there are a number of groups we have not listed there that are operating as well.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Are they allied groups?

**Mr MARTIN** — They are allied groups.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — If you would like to provide a full list to the secretariat, that will make sure that we are actually capturing everyone. I note that you have traversed the entire state in the list that you just read out, so if we can have the most fulsome list possible, that would be excellent.

We have received a number of proforma submissions from people that are seeking to refer us to the desired outcome of a ban based on the impact upon ecosystems and marine waterways et cetera and asking the

committee to support the bill in the form as proposed. What I would like to get your views on is the extent to which you have a united or consolidated view on alternatives to plastic bags. We have heard previous witness evidence that has talked about the importance of an educative function in moving away from single-use bags to compostable product for particular perishable items but that that needs to go hand in glove with an effort to change people's cultural expectations of receiving a bag in which to carry whatever they purchase. How in your view do we reduce the possibility of shifting environmental and ecological harm through perhaps getting product from elsewhere in a way that is not regulated to the high standards whilst also encouraging people to be better and more prepared in the way in which they consume goods in the market? In short — if not plastic bags, then what? And in relation to the 'what', why is that better than plastic bags from an overall perspective?

**Mr SKEHAN** — I am also a member of Plastic Bag Free Torquay, which is where my role in this whole exercise started. Our position from the very outset has been to encourage people to bring their own bags. They are better off being cloth bags than the reusable shopping bags — the green ones and the red ones — that Coles and Woolworths provide, because they are still made of plastic. Although they are a better alternative and they are a process of getting people to understand that single-use plastic bags are not the right way to go, we have always encouraged people to simply bring their own bags. That is really our solution.

In terms of alternatives, I am not a chemist and I do not understand the standards as they currently sit. If a bag is truly compostable in a compost system that is your backyard standard compost system, then that to my mind would be something that we would support. This is just my view; Dale may have a different view. If a bag is not compostable in a backyard composting system, I think it is probably a step forward but not where we want to be.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Just to tease that out a little bit, to my mind the policy conundrum that we are trying to resolve in the course of this inquiry includes the question about shifting risk and shifting harm. If you do a brief online search, you can find that there are cornstarch and compostable products — rice-related and bran products — available worldwide, produced in any number of different countries. So to your mind is having something which is compostable and can be disposed of in a residential compost bin, irrespective of where it comes from, a better alternative than the plastics that you spoke about in your opening presentation?

**Mr SKEHAN** — It is not a big better alternative, if you know what I mean. It is a small step forward. A bigger step forward is to change people's behaviour. The issue of single-use disposable items in general is something that we need to tackle very broadly, including single-use plastic water bottles, the coffee cup you have got on your desk there — all those issues are behavioural changes. So we need to be very much educating and encouraging people to bring their own, really, is my view. Is it a step forward? Yes, it is a step forward, but it is a small step forward.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — What about perishables? What about purchasing meat?

**Mr SKEHAN** — There are obviously health regulations. I know at the farmers market which I go to quite regularly they are required to vacuum-seal the meat. There are health and safety regulations around that. Having said that, the IGA at Torquay has just agreed to put our meat into our own container when we take it there, which they have been reluctant to do in the past because they were of the view that there were health regulations around that, which there are actually not. They did a little bit of research themselves and found that to be the case, so people can bring their own containers if they go to the butchers or if they go to the supermarket to get meat from the deli. Of course most meat is pre-packaged, but if they do go to the butcher, where it is perhaps not pre-packaged, they can take their own container as well.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — What about more broadly in the supply chain as far as packaging is concerned? On the one hand if we are looking at changing buyer behaviour around the way in which people say no to a bag at the point-of-sale, how do we challenge what you have just confirmed to be your understanding — that the majority of smallgoods and processed meats and deli items are pre-packaged? They come in those vacuum-sealed packages, often with a harder backed plastic base, are then covered over with a vacuum-sealed clear plastic cover and then often they have a paper sleeve around them as well. What do we do about those sorts of packaging decisions that are taken by industry, because to my mind if the product is available in the supermarket in that form and a buyer has no choice other than to perhaps drive to the next town, that still presents challenges. I note that you are talking about plastic bags and bottles and those sorts of consumables, but what is your view on that element of the supply chain?

**Mr SKEHAN** — This is where the development of alternatives, such as cornstarch-based plastic alternatives, for want of a better term, is an opportunity to develop those products. Again, I am not a chemist. I am not an industrial engineer, but I would think that it is not too big of a stretch for the manufacturers of the cornstarch bags that we think are in Campbellfield — —

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — They are all over the world. They are not just in Campbellfield. That is one of the reasons I am asking this.

**Mr SKEHAN** — Sure. Those opportunities, I would think, are available to develop those products that can provide that packaging.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Do you have any view on how we would encourage people to purchase local product in terms of compostable cornstarch, rice or other sorts of packaging options rather than going for plastics or, where cost and triple-bottom-line reporting rules all, perhaps going overseas to areas where compostable bag manufacture may not be regulated at all?

**Mr SKEHAN** — I suppose the local purchasing of product is an issue that certainly the state government could get involved in educating both business and consumers around, certainly at a local level. Councils could get involved in encouraging small businesses, particularly small local producers, to use more sustainable packaging. Typically small local producers tend to be a little bit higher up the price point because they are more boutique producers, so they could be encouraged to do that.

There is also education. In terms of the issue of moving away from excess plastic packaging to more sustainable plastic packaging, again it is a transitional process. Our focus has been on plastic bags because we see that as low-hanging fruit. Plastic bags are just unnecessary, whereas vacuum-sealed meat packaging is a necessity at a market because it is required by the health regulations. If there are alternatives that can be developed or encouraged to be developed through innovation funds or the like, then I think that would be a worthwhile exercise for the government to explore as well.

**Mr MARTIN** — Can I just add to a couple of those points as well?

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Yes.

**Mr MARTIN** — When we are talking about the packaging, especially around things like organic fruit, I know a lot of people that I have spoken to over the last few months, especially since the bill has gone up, have expressed a real concern about the packaging of organic products in particular. They see it as obviously the supermarkets using it as a way to differentiate the two streams. But fruit already comes in a package: its skin. I think wrapping that up again to be able to basically differentiate the two products that you are selling is completely and utterly unnecessary. So if we are talking about meats and we are talking about these things, these need to be worked out further down the track, but if we are talking about the excess packaging on a lot of the fruit products in particular, I think that is completely unnecessary. That is in my opinion, anyway.

Also talking about some of the biodegradable bags, for consumers it is a bit of a greenwash at the moment. There is talk about things being 100 per cent degradable, 100 per cent biodegradable, biodegradable, degradable — —

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — We were just talking about this earlier.

**Mr MARTIN** — It is incredibly frustrating for people. The Australian standard states that it has to be able to biodegrade within a commercial composting facility, and that standard is not really accessible to a lot of people in Australia unless you are putting it in a particular bin and it is going away to somewhere in particular. Until that standard gets ironed out and the emphasis is put on making it able to be put in your backyard compost, I think there is going to be continual confusion. Until we work out alternatives, we should just ban all of them until there is a better option available.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — What is the definition of biodegradable, then?

**Mr MARTIN** — That would be meeting the Australian standard as in the AS 4736-2006, and that is something that biodegrades under certain conditions. The different conditions in which it biodegrades depend on whatever standard you are looking at, so — —

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — What does biodegrade mean to your mind?

**Mr MARTIN** — To my mind it means break down completely, 100 per cent — —

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — To particulate level? One of the things we are also grappling with in the course of this inquiry is the difference between compostable on the one hand and biodegradable on the other. You might have a biodegradable product which simply breaks down into very, very small pieces which retain the essential quality of the product in the first place, albeit in a much smaller form, which is then capable of being ingested by anything or anyone, and that then forms part of toxicity testing. Talk us through that in terms of the difference between compostable and biodegradable, because that is what we are here to learn.

**Mr MARTIN** — Not all things that are biodegradable are compostable. You want to be able to basically get your compost and go and put it out on your fruit and veggies. There are certain things that do not biodegrade to a standard that you would want to put in your mouth afterwards. There are certain toxicities. Things can biodegrade into finite particles, but you will not actually end up being able to put that on your garden.

Let me add as well that I do not study the rhizosphere; I am not a scientist in any way. We have all grappled with this issue, and the only thing we have to guide us at the moment is the Australian standard.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Does the Australian standard of biodegradable include things that may in fact degrade to a point where they have become smaller in size but still retain an element of toxicity in the form that you just talked about?

**Mr MARTIN** — I do not have the standard in front of me, but there are certain time frames in which it is supposed to break down — —

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Break down to a level where it does not have that toxicity or break down completely?

**Mr MARTIN** — Under certain conditions. It is these conditions that are required. If a biodegradable bag, for instance, ends up in a marine environment where these conditions are not met, then it will continue to remain as a bag out in the marine environment, causing all the environmental damage that a plastic bag would cause.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Would the standard cover that, though?

**Mr MARTIN** — Would the standard cover the — —

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — That particular bag. If the nature of the Australian standard describes something which under certain conditions will break down in a certain way and that particular product is not exposed to those conditions but would otherwise meet the standard, are we looking at something which might get the tick on the Australian standard on one hand whilst not in fact delivering any relief from environmental risk on the other?

**Mr SKEHAN** — Yes, absolutely.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Okay, good. That is very helpful. Thank you.

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — Thank you, gentlemen, for your presentation. I have got to say, Robert, you were a bit alarmist at the start with some of the language you used, which concerns me because we are here to hear evidence. You said, ‘hundreds of years’ and then ‘thousands of years’, and I looked at the fact that I think plastic bags have been in existence for about 50 years.

**Mr SKEHAN** — It is a little bit longer.

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — A bit longer — whatever.

**Mr SKEHAN** — And that was a direct quote. That ‘1000 years’ was from Mr Thwaites. They were not my words; they were Mr Thwaite’s words.

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — Well, 1000 years. The problem I have is with the issue of biodegradable. As I have been searching Mr Google — —

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — It is Ms Google, thank you.

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — Mr Google.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Ms Google.

**Ms DUNN** — It is a non-gender-specific Google.

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — Well, I am actually male and proud of it, but anyway the realities are — —

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Mansplaining 101 featuring here at 20 to 2 on a Thursday afternoon.

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — I just thought I would say that when I was looking at Ms Google the issue I noticed was that nothing seems to degrade when it is in landfill because of the fact that there is no oxygen, there is no water and they are concealed in the environment such that they are not meant to degrade, given the purposes of what they are designed for. I am just curious. When you say ‘1000 years’ it then makes me query whether the rest of what you are saying is doubtful. What I am getting at is: is this more about a broader agenda of banning plastic bags because it is just something to ban, or do you have other agendas around this whole process of why you are existing?

**Mr SKEHAN** — That is an interesting question. Firstly, the ‘1000 years’ was a direct quote from Mr John Thwaites. My understanding is that that might be a little bit past the amount of time that single-use plastic bags are in existence for. You are right about when plastic bags go to landfill. Again as we keep saying, we are not scientists. We have both read extensively on this subject. My understanding is that when a plastic bag goes into landfill it will last up to 400 or 500 years until it breaks down into its component parts. Part of that process is an attraction of and a leaching of some toxic chemicals.

But also, and more alarmingly, when organic waste is captured inside those plastic bags it has a tendency to convert to methane rather than carbon dioxide. As you would probably be aware, plastic basically is a carbon-based product. That methane, as you probably know, is 25 per cent more damaging to the environment in terms of greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide. So putting plastic into landfill is a really bad thing, particularly putting organic waste inside a plastic bag inside landfill. I think out at Cranbourne there was a — —

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — That is right.

**Ms DUNN** — There most certainly was.

**Mr SKEHAN** — There was that whole issue.

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — Yes. As you were talking I was remembering that. I was here as a member when that was all going on.

**Mr SKEHAN** — Yes. That was a bit of a wake-up call at the time — very much so — and that is part of the problem. All of these issues — we cannot really separate them. That is one of the challenges that we have. It is complex, it is difficult and there are issues of what is biodegradable, what is compostable and what is not. What we need to do in my view, and this is a very much a personal plea, is actually understand what is going on. We know this is bad. We know that at its base level plastic lasts for a long time, and we know that every 10 years we are producing as much plastic as we have produced — this is globally — in the history of the world.

So every 10 years the amount of plastic on the planet is doubled. Let us say it lasts for 60 years. As plastic has been produced for 50 years, every piece of plastic that has ever been produced still exists. It is in landfill, it is in our oceans, it is on our streets and it is in our parks — all that sort of stuff — and when this is happening it is causing damage to the environment. It is causing damage to our ecosystems. I do not want leave that legacy for my children and my grandchildren — that we were the people who had the opportunity to do something about this and we chose not to.

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — That has answered what I was asking. My question was also about organics. As you were talking about it, I was thinking about my zucchinis that I buy from Coles that are in the organic section. They are wrapped in plastic, and oddly I did not even think about them being wrapped in plastic but I thought about the convenience of them being in plastic. I buy organic zucchinis because I like the flavour of them better, but I did not even think about the plastic.

This is what I am trying to get at. As a consumer who is busy during the day and has got work — an accounting business or whatever it may be — you just want to get to the supermarket, you want to get your stuff, you want to get home and you have not got the thought processes to think about where that plastic bag is going to be in 50 years or 500 years. So the education issue still comes up. You could ban cars because cars do damage in other ways, but that is not going to be a reality of a Parliament. So I am trying to work out how you balance the banning outright versus consumer needs and industry needs. Have you given some thought to the issue that you raised of organic packaging, for example?

**Mr MARTIN** — As far as talking about industry, I think Aldi's business model is a perfect example. Supermarkets are a huge consumer of these things, and their business model does not seem to be suffering too much from not having bags. Looking at this issue of plastic packaging and convenience, is having a zucchini wrapped in plastic more convenient than a zucchini not wrapped in plastic?

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — Yes, for me, because it is in a clean environment, it has not been damaged and it has not been touched. I am just giving you the straight-out consumer viewpoint, because that was my thought process when I bought them. It just dawned on me that maybe I should not have bought the organic zucchinis in a plastic-wrapped container with a polystyrene tray, which defeats the purpose of buying the blasted things in the first place. I am trying to get to the education side, because people do not think of those things. I am just trying to reconcile it with this banning notion.

**Mr SKEHAN** — I can give you an example, which is our local farmers market, which does not have plastic packaging around its fruit and vegetables. A lot of people bring their own — —

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — Most people do not go to a farmers market.

**Mr SKEHAN** — Yes, sure.

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — They are nice and they are boutique, but the reality is that in the real world most people go to one of the three major supermarkets. And Aldi is a good point to note.

**Mr SKEHAN** — Yes. When we do not shop at the local farmers market, we shop at the local IGA. We have our own produce bags, which we take, and we have our own reusable bags, which we take. Yes, it takes a bit longer to pack your own fruit and vegies into your own bags, and it takes the supermarket a little bit longer to process it through the check-out. Let us be really honest: the reason why supermarkets pack organic fruit in plastic is because then they can put a barcode on it and then they can swipe it. They do not have to measure it or weigh it; they have to punch in some numbers.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — It is a supply chain process.

**Ms DUNN** — Yes, and work out what it is.

**Mr SKEHAN** — It is a cost-reduction process. And polystyrene in particular — you have got your Ms Google there. Look at what it is made of. It cannot be recycled. It is really bad stuff. That is one of the things we really should be focusing on getting rid of, and again it is unnecessary. Yes, I acknowledge that meat, for example, fish and some other products need, due to health regulations, to be packaged, but they do not need to be packaged in polystyrene.

**Mr MARTIN** — Looking at the cost to landfill, I think we are going to run out of landfill space in a couple of years time.

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — It is a big place, Australia.

**Mr MARTIN** — Well, it is another cost.



**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — It is a cost, but Australia is a big place.

**Ms DUNN** — I do not think we want it turned into landfill, though.

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — No, but you cannot avoid it.

**Mr MARTIN** — Speaking as well of banning things, five out of eight jurisdictions in Australia have identified that this is an issue, and they are taking action, especially on plastic bags in particular. I know others as well are talking about container deposit schemes and things like that to actually lift the recycling rates. This is all diversion from landfill, and this is reusing resources as well. We should really consider it.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — That is why we are here.

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — Yes, I do not disagree. I buy my vegies without bags and other things, so — —

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Right.

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — Yes, I thought I would share that.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — No, that is good. It is a good iterative process.

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — I am not just that evil right wing Liberal member.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — That is your description of yourself there, Mr Dalla-Riva, not ours.

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — Well, it is the left view me.

**Mr MELHEM** — Just to continue that theme, we are talking about banning plastic bags in supermarkets, and I think there is the clear, strong view of: ‘Do we really need them?’. You talked about the polystyrene and the food packaging. That was your second point. Can you take me through the difference between a metropolitan approach and a regional approach? Does the approach have to be different or do we have to have the same approach? The reason I am asking this is because the next question — I am going to give you a heads up — is about high-density living, apartments and stuff. How are we going to tackle that, where they cannot have compost? I do not know, unless you have got some ideas. That would be my next question. Do we have a different approach between metropolitan and regional areas?

**Mr SKEHAN** — I will have a crack at that first, I think. Just in terms of plastic bags, I do not see any difference between somebody bringing their own shopping bag to the supermarket in Torquay, where I live, or in —

**Mr MARTIN** — Brunswick.

**Mr SKEHAN** — Brunswick, where Dale lives. I was going to say Moreland, sorry. It is exactly the same process. You put your bags in your car or you carry your bags with you when you get to the supermarket check-out. You either put it through yourself, because there are more and more self-serve check-outs, or the employee of the supermarket packs it for you and then you pick it up and carry it home. I do not see a difference at all.

**Mr MELHEM** — I will go to the next question, then, because let us face it: a lot of people use plastic bags to actually put their rubbish in and basically in most cases that is how it ends up in landfill. So how do you solve that problem? What would you say to people? You were talking about compost, but in an apartment how do you solve that problem?

**Mr MARTIN** — Definitely. I and many of my friends live in high-density areas, and you are seeing more and more demand for composting facilities at apartments. It is a changing area. People are starting to become more and more aware of this as an issue. I would like to note as well that this is a bill about banning plastic bags at the check-out. This is not about banning garbage bags, so we are not restricting people who cannot find any other way to get rid of their stuff other than through garbage bags. They are still entitled to purchase these.

But one of the things that a lot of people I know have done and a lot of people in the community have told me about is that they are reducing the different waste streams, so people are having a wet and a dry bin, for

instance. You will find that 90 per cent of the wet bin is stuff that can go into the compost. A lot of people are doing really simple things like having a little compost bin at their place, walking downstairs with a bucket and then tipping it into a larger composting bin that is then taken away to farms, cafes or whatever to reuse through dehydration machines and composting facilities that are now starting to pop up in and around the inner city.

I think that if you take the view that every single person does not care — they wrap it up in a plastic bag and they throw it out — I would disagree with that. I think people are becoming really aware of these issues, and again, if people feel extremely strongly about having to put their waste into a bag, then they can buy a garbage bag.

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — Or get chooks.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Chooks in an apartment? That would be an interesting phenomenon.

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — Why not? Chooks eat everything.

**Mr SKEHAN** — You could put them on the roof.

**Ms DUNN** — Thank you, gentlemen, for your submission. Firstly, I am aware that Associate Professor Osborn is listed to present to us later today, but I am just wondering whether you are aware yourselves of any particular scientific studies in relation to the toxicity of plastic bags and the cumulative effects of that toxicity on the environment. Are there any studies you can point the committee to?

**Mr MARTIN** — I would probably point the committee to all of the groups that submitted to the federal Senate inquiry. I think that is probably a very good resource to use, noting the recommendations coming out of that inquiry as well. Like we have both said before, we are not specialists; we are not scientists.

**Ms DUNN** — No, absolutely. That is great advice for us. I want to turn to this issue of plastic packaging for fruit and vegetables. Essentially both of you, Mr Martin and Mr Skehan, have talked about how it is unnecessary packaging, it is excess packaging and it cannot be recycled. Is the reason you think it is so important the fact that it is ending up in landfill or, even worse, ending up in the environment? I am just wondering what the key is to why it is so important to get rid of that element of packaging.

**Mr SKEHAN** — The cumulative effect of disposing of plastic in a broad sense in either landfill, or worse, it escapes landfill and ends up in parks, rivers or the ocean, is certainly part of the concern. As I said earlier, my understanding is that in the next 10 years we will produce as much plastic in the world as we have produced in the previous 60 years, so it is going to double. Things are not going to get better unless we make them better, so if we do nothing and continue to behave the way we have behaved, then the amount of plastic entering our ecosystems and causing damage to ecosystems and killing wildlife and marine creatures will continue to increase. I am sure there will be other organisations that will give a much more eloquent description of that than I have done.

But the concern is, as I said, I have a nine-year-old daughter and she looks at me sometimes and says, ‘Daddy, what are these people doing? They’re killing my planet. We have to do something’. That is really the concern, whether it is landfill — the problem with landfill is it is still in the environment. We have to, I could say, rape and pillage areas of forest to create landfill sites, and then what we do is dump a whole lot of stuff in there, waste in there, and we do not actually know what is happening to that waste. That often is on a watercourse — not often, it is always on some sort of watercourse — and there are toxic chemicals leaking out of these things and into watercourses, and we may very well be drinking that water or those toxic chemicals right now because of our carelessness in just thinking that we have this endless supply of land available to dump stuff in. We need to change our behaviour; we need to start looking at ways to reduce the amount of waste we create.

One of our colleagues, Erin Rhoads, gives talks on waste reduction strategies. Her waste for 12 months would fit in that water jar in front of you. She does not have a bin. We put our bin out maybe every four months. One thing that Coles and Woolies do is have a REDcycle program, and we are fortunate enough to have that in Torquay. All my soft plastic and all the soft plastic I pick up from the street out the front goes into that bin. Once we get rid of our recyclables and our organic waste, and we also have chooks and they do eat everything — actually they do not eat oranges for some reason; I do not know why —

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — What was that?

**Mr SKEHAN** — They do not eat oranges.

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — No.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Duck à l'orange may have scared them off.

**Mr SKEHAN** — Yes, possibly. We get rid of everything that we can recycle. When I put our recycling bin out last night I looked in our landfill bin and there was nothing in it. It is possible. Okay, we are lucky. We have a bit of space, and it is perhaps more difficult for people in more densely populated areas.

**Ms DUNN** — In an urban context.

**Mr SKEHAN** — But it is possible, and it is the education around people understanding what we are actually doing that needs to be at the forefront. The state government taking action on plastic bags is a message. It is just saying, 'Hey, something's going wrong here. We need to change'. We need to take some steps forward in taking action to get people to understand that there is a problem.

**Mr MARTIN** — Being at so many markets, running workshops and seminars, we have been doing this for about two years now together. It is interesting, when we were out we got 11 600 physical signatures. I do not know if anyone has ever tried to get 11 600 physical signatures, but you have to have a lot more conversations than you do actually getting physical signatures. You are informing people and the public that this is such a huge environmental issue. I do recall one conversation that I had really early on with somebody, and I spoke to them about a lot of the stuff we have said here today. They turned around to me and said, 'Well, if these things are so bad for the environment, why doesn't the government just ban them?'. That really resonated with me for the cause. Now I still remember it like it was yesterday. People and the public look to the government for environmental leadership, and at the moment the other states are showing environmental leadership. We need Victoria to catch up.

**Ms DUNN** — Thank you for that. In relation to other jurisdictions — excellent segue, Mr Martin — you spoke a little earlier and I think the quote you gave was that five out of eight jurisdictions were taking action. I might have those numbers wrong or that quote wrong. I am just wondering if it is possible for you to paint a picture of what that looks like in terms of those jurisdictions — the significant differences and the environmental impact on the fact that they have taken action?

**Mr MARTIN** — As a good reference I think the Queensland government's recent discussion paper is an excellent resource for the committee to look at through all these in more detail. Off the top of my head I believe it was South Australia banning single-use lightweight plastic bags up to a weight of 35 microns in thickness in 2009. Then I believe it was the ACT and the NT in 2011, and then Tasmania in 2013 — all taking very similar legislation — and Queensland obviously last week announcing that they are no longer going to wait for an east coast approach; they are actually going to push ahead and do this in line with their container deposit legislation, which I also think is very good legislation, just quietly. They have taken the next step, also banning biodegradable bags, which I think is an excellent idea personally. I do not know if you want to add anything to that, Rob.

**Mr SKEHAN** — There is also Fremantle City Council, who have had a crack. As you may know they were stopped by the state government because it still has to go through both houses of course. Surf Coast shire also investigated introducing a ban. Their legal advice was that the Environment Protection Act prohibits from doing that because of the changes made by the Labor government back in 2007. Those changes were pre-emptions to a ban which did not happen, but the changes that were made stopped Surf Coast shire from producing a local law to ban the distribution. Having said that, Surf Coast shire has a policy in place that says no plastic bags, straws, cutlery, cups — I am missing something —

**Mr MARTIN** — Bottles.

**Mr SKEHAN** — or bottles can be sold on land that is managed by the council at an event. So all the markets in Torquay, which are on council land, and the Great Ocean Road Coast Committee have adopted exactly a mirror policy, so at any market in Torquay you are prohibited as a stallholder from supplying any of those products. There is a 12-month transition, so come April next year that ban will be in place. The risk to the market operator is that their permit will be revoked if they do not enforce that.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Can I just ask a quick one on that public event banning of certain plastic products? Has that led to a corresponding increase in the use of cornstarch or bamboo products of a similar nature?

**Mr SKEHAN** — I cannot answer that. I do not know.

**Ms DUNN** — We might ask Surf Coast.

**Mr SKEHAN** — Bear in mind it is a transitional process at this point in time, so some stallholders at some of the markets are still handing out plastic bags. I am working with the council to try to educate them. I know Mr Dalla-Riva does not necessarily consider farmers markets to be all that important, but anyway at our farmers market everybody just brings their own bags. Bear in mind Anglesea, which is just down the road from us, was the first town in mainland Australia to voluntarily be plastic bag free, and they have been for 12 years. At all the other markets generally it is just people adopting a good habit of bringing their own bags. I do not think there has been an increase in the use of plastic substitutes, such as bamboo cutlery and paper plates. There has been that transition, but I do not think the bags have. I think really it is more people bringing their own bags.

**Mr MARTIN** — Can I just finish off by saying that Victoria is the only jurisdiction in Australia not to prohibit or control one of the major sources of marine plastic pollution in the last decade, so we are the only one that has not actually taken any action on something that is environmentally devastating.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — I see you are reading from a screen. What is your source for that, Mr Martin?

**Mr MARTIN** — My source for that? That is a recent Boomerang Alliance report, and I note they will be coming up shortly, so they will be able to speak more to that, I am sure.

**Ms DUNN** — I have a question, if I may. Mr Skehan, earlier you were talking about the bill and you said it was good policy. I believe you also said it would be a positive impact on the economy. I am just wondering if you could elaborate for the committee on the positive impacts that would flow onto the economy?

**Mr SKEHAN** — Sure. There are a couple of issues around that. I will perhaps just look at the positive ones. The first thing is that it is my understanding that no single-use plastic bags are actually manufactured in Victoria. We do have some biodegradable bags manufactured in Victoria, and we do have a whole raft of reusable bags that are manufactured in Victoria by various small businesses, so a shift to reusable bags would provide employment opportunities for small business, and small business is the backbone of the Victorian economy.

**Ms DUNN** — Absolutely.

**Mr SKEHAN** — The other opportunity, or the other risk, really, is around jobs. I know in 2012 the Surf Coast shire did an economic impact analysis of tourism. Just last week our Premier, Mr Andrews, commented that:

... you can't split the environment from the economy. Our clean, green image is so important for jobs and prosperity.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — In relation to the unconventional gas ban.

**Mr SKEHAN** — In relation to fracking, yes, that is correct. It is as relevant to plastic pollution and marine plastic pollution as it is to fracking, and particularly for coastal communities such as Torquay. Two of the largest tourist attractions in Victoria are the Great Ocean Road and Bells Beach. If Bells Beach is full of plastic bags, people will not want to go surfing there anymore. We take the kids quite often for little drives. We took them down to the Twelve Apostles or the — —

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — The nine apostles.

**Mr SKEHAN** — Or the nine apostles.

**Ms DUNN** — However many are actually left now.

**Mr SKEHAN** — And Madeline keeps saying, 'Daddy, I can't see 12'.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — The submarine and supermarine apostles situation.

**Ms DUNN** — At least they can count.

**Mr SKEHAN** — And as I said, Madeline was saying to me — my nine-year-old — ‘Daddy, I can only see nine apostles. I can see a lot more plastic bags and a lot more coffee cups and a lot more plastic bottles around. Why are people doing this?’. And that is my question.

Has anybody been to Bali in the last four or five years? Does anybody know anybody who has been to Bali in the last four or five years? I know three or four people who have gone expecting this beautiful place, and it is trashed, and their view is, ‘Well, I’m not going back there, unfortunately. It’s just full of plastic’. And, yes, Torquay is not Bali, but the implications of not doing something are not dissimilar. If all the tourists that go to the Great Ocean Road and the Twelve Apostles go home and say, ‘Listen, don’t go there because it’s full of plastic pollution’, that will have a massive impact on our tourism industry.

In Victoria we are transitioning away from manufacturing and have been for 25 years. Tourism and hospitality is where it is at. If we trash the opportunity for growth in tourism and hospitality, what are we left with? Let us be honest. So there is a massive risk there, one that we should be trying to mitigate.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Can I just ask, gentlemen, do you do any work with any of the large retailers, producers or suppliers who provide non-plastic packaging, and do you have, for example, a list of preferred retailers who produce, say, cornstarch packaging? Because that is the natural other side of the coin on all of this, and it gets back to the first question I asked: if not plastic, then what? What are you looking at in terms of those retailers, producers or providers who are looking at other options for packaging where it is not plastic bags, because you are Plastic Bag Free Victoria as opposed to bag-free Victoria.

**Mr SKEHAN** — Correct, and I will answer that. Our view is that people bring their own bags; it is as simple as that. If you shop at Aldi, you take your own bags because you do not want to be hit with 80 cents to buy one of theirs. You might do it once or twice, but you learn. I talk to lots of people, and we have an Aldi in Grovedale, which is about 10 minutes away. I see people coming out of the supermarket, and I will say, ‘What are you doing?’. They will scurry the other way sometimes and try to avoid me. I say, ‘Where is your bag?’. ‘I just forgot’. I say, ‘Do you ever shop at Aldi? Do you forget your bags then?’. ‘No, I always take them because they don’t give me one’.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — They do give you one; you just have to pay for it.

**Mr SKEHAN** — Well, you have just got to pay for it, so there is a cost involved in forgetting your bag.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — When we are looking, though, at changing that behaviour and moving away from plastics, have you done any work in relation to retailers, suppliers or producers who use cornstarch products or other products, such as the type Ms Dunn referred to as being manufactured in Campbellfield, which are manufactured all over the world? Have you looked into that as additional work to supplement what you are talking about in eradicating and removing plastic bag use?

**Mr SKEHAN** — Personally, no, because as I said I do not have the scientific understanding —

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — No, that is okay.

**Mr SKEHAN** — and I do not necessarily have the trust that what I am reading or what I am seeing in terms of a bag, whether it is called biodegradable, compostable or oxo-degradable, is actually what I am getting. Unfortunately there is a bit of greenwashing in this space, so I have not looked at that because I just do not have the trust in it. With the retailers that I have worked with — and again, small local businesses — I just encourage them to encourage their customers to use reusable bags or to provide paper bags. Again in Torquay you have probably heard of Boomerang Bags. We have got, I think, 11 boxes around town, and we also encourage people just to donate reusable bags, except for Coles and Woolies, who refuse to have that mechanism in their stores.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — They have bag return facilities in their stores, though.

**Mr SKEHAN** — Yes, it is fairly token, though.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — So that is not saying that they are not doing anything. They are saying that you can bring your bags back and put them into this canister which is near the exit to the store.

**Mr SKEHAN** — Yes, that is correct. But I would suggest that if you walked down the main street of Torquay and asked 100 people, ‘Can you recycle bags at Coles?’, they would say, ‘What are you talking about?’. It is not publicised, it is not promoted and there is no awareness that that is available.

**Mr MELHEM** — Which could be part of the solution.

**Mr SKEHAN** — Absolutely it could be part of the solution. Look, things like meat packaging can be recycled, and there is a fairly large array of soft plastics, so basically anything that is crumpled can be recycled into those — —

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Sorry, did you just say that meat packaging can be recycled?

**Mr SKEHAN** — If it is soft plastic.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Polystyrene, though, you indicated in your earlier evidence cannot be recycled.

**Mr SKEHAN** — No, sorry, not polystyrene. Soft plastic, so at the farmers markets — sorry, Mr Dalla-Riva.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — No, you can make as many references to farmers markets as you possibly can. We will get him to one, one day.

**Ms DUNN** — I think we need a site visit to a farmers market.

**Mr SKEHAN** — Where is your local farmers market?

**Ms DUNN** — And we will take our own bags.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — I love a farmers market.

**Mr SKEHAN** — Absolutely. And that is why — —

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — So you are distinguishing soft plastics from polystyrene in that sense because many, many meat products are also packaged in polystyrene, so it is important for us to have a distinction there.

**Mr SKEHAN** — Yes, any soft plastic can be recycled through the recycle program. But again, where it is processed is not in Australia; it is all sent overseas. It is crumpled up and sent to China and comes back as building-type products, I think is my understanding.

**Mr MARTIN** — I think I would just like to say that maybe we should just pick up the phone to one of the other four states that has done it and find out what they have done. Surely industry groups over there were able to transition in a way. I know there are so many resources online. I think originally I got some information from the City of Fremantle on Australian-specific producers and manufacturers of these different products.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Just to assure you, talking to other states and picking up the phone, as you have just indicated, is not something that has not been happening. The Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Water, Lily D’Ambrosio, has confirmed that in fact Victoria will be taking on all of the information that is submitted as part of the Queensland discussion process. So let us not cut to the bottom line around nothing happening around communication with the other jurisdictions. This is a process that we have to go through to understand what the implications are for Victoria and how we get to that point in a way that takes into consideration all of the other factors in play.

**Mr SKEHAN** — Definitely.

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — That was a big dummy spit that just flew across the room.

**Mr SKEHAN** — Yes, we noticed that.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — A biodegradable dummy, Mr Dalla-Riva.

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — It just flew across the room.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Anything else then, gentlemen? We are just about at time, but if you would like to provide any further information to the secretariat, in particular on the studies that were referred to — Boomerang will come along and give us that information as well, but anything else in relation to the other things that came up in your evidence today — feel free to provide that to the secretariat. In addition to that you will be sent a copy of the transcript as well from today, so that will come through from Hansard. If you have anything further you would like to add, feel free to get in touch.

**Mr SKEHAN** — Thank you for having us.

**Witnesses withdrew.**