

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into recycling and waste management

Melbourne—Tuesday, 6 August 2019

MEMBERS

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Mr David Davis

Mr Tim Quilty

Dr Catherine Cumming

WITNESSES

Mr William Freeman, and

Ms Sheriden Tate.

The CHAIR: I declare open the environment and planning standing committee public hearing. The committee is hearing evidence today in relation to the inquiry into recycling and waste management and the evidence is being recorded. I would like to welcome Mr Freeman and Ms Tate for making yourselves available today. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you give today is protected by law. However, any comment repeated outside this hearing may not be protected. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript over the next few days. Again, thank you for agreeing to present together because of time pressure. We appreciate that. I would like to ask: who would like to go first? If we could keep the openings to about 5 minutes each, that would be really great. Mr Freeman, do you want to go first?

Mr FREEMAN: By all means, yes. Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Bill Freeman, and I have been a resident of Campbellfield, in the City of Hume, for approximately 10 years. I have not made a presentation of this nature before a committee, so forgive me if I err in any way. I will do my best.

My home is in the far east of the suburb of Campbellfield and abuts the Merri Creek reserve, which is jointly administered by Melbourne Water, Parks Victoria and the Merri Creek Management Committee. I am a private, non-affiliated individual.

With respect to the Coolaroo fire we were not directly affected, as the wind on that day was in the north and we are east of where the fire was taking place. I am sure you have already heard numerous submissions directly relating to that. Before I go into the rest of my presentation I would like to take this opportunity to inform you that over the years that we have been living there we have made numerous calls to the EPA about a very unpleasant smell covering a very large area of Campbellfield and possibly neighbouring suburbs. It was a rancid, somewhat organic odour of varying intensity that we could detect from time to time in either very still conditions or when the wind was coming from the north. On some occasions we would drive around trying to find the source of it but were never able to. It could cover an area from the north of Barry Road to as far south as Mahoneys Road. Whatever it was it must have been from a very significant and powerful source. The EPA never got back to us about it, although I am pleased to say it has been a couple of years now, except for one instance on 28 April last year, since we have had to endure this pollution. I have the EPA reference numbers for you if there is any interest, and I will leave a copy of my address with you.

I would like to make my personal contribution based on the terms of reference of the inquiry, which I have read, with an emphasis on recyclables. Given that the inquiry is into recycling and waste management, I personally am defining recyclables as consisting of short-term, being paper, cardboard, glass, aluminium, steel and the vast array of plastics mostly used for packaging. These are almost invariably for single use and pose one of the greatest and most pressing environmental challenges of our time. Also we have medium-term recyclables—I would define these as consumables, such as mobile phones and computers—and long-term recyclables, which I would define as items like refrigerators and washing machines. While much of the current controversy is about short-term recyclables, I respectfully urge the committee to consider medium and long-term recyclables in its considerations and recommendations. However, it is clear that the current waste management crisis is about short-term recyclables, and I will speak about that now.

By my reckoning and based on the research I have done the business model for short-term recycling has collapsed and recyclable material is going to landfill. This is a pretty well known fact. The outcomes are by no means satisfactory for any of the stakeholders. This is a fundamental that must be addressed. I believe that government policy at all levels should aim to place the burden of responsibility for the appropriate disposal of recyclables back down the supply chain as far as possible. Government has a responsibility to act for the greater

good of society, especially when the free market will not. Legislation and financial incentives designed to create an industry framework to enable a viable business model for recyclers are required.

China's intent to regulate the importation of certain recyclables has been on the table since 2013, when its Operation Green Fence policy was implemented. So it should come as no surprise that the subsequent National Sword policy, lodged with the World Trade Organization in 2017, has now been fully implemented, adopting a 0.5 per cent to 1 per cent acceptable contamination threshold for 24 categories of recyclable waste. Up until the deadline of March 2018 Australia continued to supply 3 per cent to 5 per cent contaminated product because China basically was letting it get away with it.

In July 2017 China upped the ante and notified the World Trade Organization that it would be cracking down on the contamination specifications, as previously foreshadowed. China has given its suppliers plenty of time to literally clean up their act, but very little has been done. What we are facing today should have been widely anticipated by all levels of government and the industry; however, until now there has been a failure by government and the industry to do anything of significance to head off the situation we are currently facing. In short, there appears to be little connectivity on this issue between the industry and various levels of government. The manifestation of this is the failure to respond to China's warning with respect to capped contamination.

SKM, a key player in the industry which services 30 municipalities in Victoria, is in liquidation and has stopped receiving material. Being unable to meet China's specifications, its business model has collapsed. Mountainous stockpiles of recyclables growing around the country caused by the collapse of the market are all potential Coolaroos. The City of Hume, where I live, says it is too early to find an alternative to SKM. That is in the headlines of one of the recent Leader newspapers. As the entity primarily responsible for waste collection, Hume should have seen this coming and taken a leading role in addressing this crisis. Their failure to do so along with other levels of government has put us where we are today. The recycling industry has fallen into disrepute, and there is a real risk that households and industry will start taking recycling less seriously.

To identify short and long-term solutions to the recycling/waste management crisis I believe we need to look at single-use recyclables' life cycle. I see it as the following six stages: the original manufacture of the package or single-use item, commercial use of the packaging product or single-use consumable, sale by the wholesaler and retailer, disposal by the consumer, handling by waste management and reprocessing with the aim to return the product back to step one.

What can be done at each of these stages of the life cycle? Manufacturers of the package or single-use item should minimise the different types of plastic, paper and glass for use in industry to help simplify the recycling process. They should facilitate the return of them, of single-use consumables, for recycling—e.g., printer cartridges. They should be encouraged to self-regulate, for example, by using more environmentally friendly materials, and they should be subject to legislation to push back to them responsibility for the production of environmentally friendly products, e.g.—

The CHAIR: Mr Freeman, if I may interrupt, I see you are reading and you have got a few pages to go. Because of the time restraint we are happy to incorporate all the papers into Hansard.

Mr FREEMAN: Sure. Yes.

The CHAIR: And if you are able to sort of focus on the key points to allow the committee for some questions to elaborate, whatever materials you would like to give us we would be more than happy to actually incorporate into your submission, to make life easier.

Mr FREEMAN: Yes, I know. I will move it along.

The CHAIR: Feel free—you do not have to read the whole lot, but we are happy to incorporate your material into evidence.

Mr FREEMAN: Yes, sure. No problem at all.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Mr FREEMAN: Where do I go with that? I will just go back and say that—

The CHAIR: Well, maybe you should keep going. I am sorry to interrupt. Keep going. Read the stuff. That is fine. Sorry to do that to you.

Mr FREEMAN: Look, I do not want to waste the time of the committee, but I think the final consumers—that being us—cannot continue to abrogate responsibility up or down the chain as ultimately it all passes through our hands. We need to become better recyclers. I think at the moment one of the critical things that is making it difficult for the recycling companies to have a successful business model is the standard of the material that is being supplied to them. Back in the day when we actually started recycling we used to separate all the paper products out. Now I believe that paper products represent about 60 per cent of all recycled materials by weight and I think at least at that level we should be looking at having systems for separating paper products from all of the other types of recyclable materials that are being produced by households.

The other thing is that I think that litter is an enormous global problem, and I think that we need to take further action to stop waste entering streams and ultimately the ocean. We need to stop littering at the source by encouraging civic responsibility through better education and awareness programs with respect to littering—e.g., some of you might recall the Don't Rubbish Australia campaign back in the 1970s, which was extremely successful. I really think that we need something like that again but possibly to incorporate a raised public awareness and public education about recycling and being better recyclers.

I have heard in the submissions that the Merri Creek has come up numerous times through this. I live next door to the Merri Creek. I walk out and see it every day, and I can tell you the Merri Creek is an ecological disaster. There is very little alive in the water in Merri Creek. I do not think I have ever seen a living thing in the water. I certainly would not drink it. I definitely would not swim in it; Merri Creek is in extremely poor health.

Just to close off, I think the key stakeholders here are government, commercial users and individual and industrial consumers and I think that we are all fairly clear on what government must do, but my thing that I am trying to say is that we have got to push the responsibility back down the supply chain so that it is not only individuals at the household level that are responsible. We all go into the supermarkets, and I am becoming alarmed at the extent to which plastic is being used for packaging unnecessarily. It piles up at our place and then we end up putting it all into recycling bins, and I really think that something has got to be done about that one way or another. And there is just not enough being done. The stopping of the using of plastic bags has been a complete failure. I go walking around the Merri Creek reserve and I see the Coles supposedly reusable bags. Well, they are still ending up in Merri Creek, so that has in no way been a success in my opinion.

I will leave that. I will not take up any more time of the committee. I will leave you with my written report, which basically is saying—my basic point is—that I do not think we can lay all the blame on the recycling industry. I think that their business model has fallen apart, and that is because of a failure to act and it is because they are not being supplied with material that is to a high enough standard.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Freeman. We appreciate that, and we will incorporate your report as a submission. Again, if there are any points later on you feel like you need to add on, we can incorporate them. The reason I have interrupted there is that we did not have a submission from you earlier, so that will form part of your submission.

So if I can move on to another question for Ms Tate, and we did hear from the Broadmeadows Progress Association earlier as well. I think in your submission you mainly focused on the regulatory powers of the EPA to prevent fires and so forth, so maybe if I can invite you in your opening contribution to take this on, that would be great. Ms Tate, you have got the floor.

Ms TATE: Okay. Well, I am a resident of Coolaroo. I live about 500 metres from SKM. I have got a lot of pictures here. I will give them out. This is my world. This is my neighbourhood effectively, and we have had a lot of fires. We hear the reports of three major fires—well, I can tell you, there have been a lot more major fires. We have had fires in the 19 years that I have lived there, probably from the early 2000s, from Visy to SKM to Somerton tip to Polytrade—the list goes on. And we hear about the major fires, but we do not hear about the little incidents all the time. I am getting a bit OCD now. When I have heard a siren, I have literally jumped up in

the middle of the night and driven round to Maffra Street to photograph the fire engines at SKM or the glass recycling services, which you can see—this pile here is glass. It is mountainous.

So what I would like to do is invite all of you to come out to Coolaroo and Campbellfield and have a look firsthand at what is exactly sitting out there, because it is quite horrific. I have been driving around the streets and photographing for the last few days, and it is there, and it is growing. This is in Campbellfield. These are supposed to be recycling places—I do not know what they are. To me they are just tip sites, and that is the problem. I do not believe they are being managed effectively by EPA. You had Bradbury's—the EPA waited until they had got to 450 000 litres, which was nearly three times what they were licensed for, before they acted. And when they did act and we had the fire at the point that they had got it down to 300 000 litres of chemicals, after the fire, at the community meeting, EPA put it across that we almost should have been grateful that by stopping them they had got down to 300 000, which was double what they were licensed for. So the community is frustrated. We are frustrated that it is not being monitored, and even when they go out and action things—I have got a list of EPA actions here—it takes about two years for things to get to court. And then they get a tokenistic fine, which I do not believe is a deterrent at all.

As a case in point for how long EPA takes, this is Stawell tyres. They issued the first PAN in August 2015. It took another two years of constant issuing of notices before they took control in 2017. By that time the company had been sold to a Panamanian internet marketing company. You are hardly going to get money or restitution to do remediating actions to clean up any of these sites when they either go bankrupt or they sell themselves off to whomever. So that is a frustration.

The other thing is that I am a member of the Hume safety advisory committee, so I have sort of been on board with the illegal waste dumps that have grown in number around the area. I just want to tell you a couple of things that I have been told as part of that. One of the illegal waste dumps sits next to a service station. Should that go up, it will take out the suburb. They have got caravans at these sites where they bring the chemicals out and process the chemicals, because they do not know what chemicals are in the site, so they have got what they call caravans out the front with 24-hour guards. So they are there. They bring the chemicals out test barrel by barrel, and then they know how to dispose of them. Because these are in industrial estates, it is a big hoon area, so in incidents they have had hoon drivers up there and a car has lost control and narrowly missed hitting that site.

The other thing that I was told was that they are monitoring the arsonists in the area because they are worried about more fires, and evidently Hume has the highest number of arsonists in Victoria, so it is very reassuring that these sort of things are occurring in our community.

So it is sort of multileveled. You have got SKM, and like the gentleman said, we have got to look at how that waste is being managed, how we have managed to get that stockpile, because the problem with plastic and recyclables is we are not recycling efficiently. We have got commingled waste. You look at Europe, where they have now got systems where they have got designated collection points. Victoria—hello? We have got no cash for a container deposit scheme. I lived in South Australia years ago. South Australia has had it for years. That helps to eliminate the commingled waste. I do not understand why we do not have that here. We should be phasing out single-use plastics because that is all contributing to the waste. Yes, everyone has got to take responsibility. There needs to be an education campaign. Maybe something like the Quit campaign where we educate people, and maybe EPA should have a designated section where they are going out to schools and doing training there.

There are so many things—I left my original notes at home, so I have had to write notes down, and they are a bit all over the place. I think it is just the frustration. We are meant to be intelligent people and, as was shown before, back in 1980 this conversation was happening and nothing has happened. Now, animals do not dirty their own nests. Why are we, as human beings, fouling the planet that we live in? What people do not understand is that when these toxic fires happen they might think, 'Well, it's not in my backyard', but the plume from the Bradbury's site fire I believe landed in Berwick because of the way the atmosphere was that day. At any point in time any of us can be exposed to what are carcinogenic materials. We do not know—we are sitting here now—that we have been exposed to something for the future. I have to worry about my children where I live. When the SKM fire started I was actually interstate, but my daughter was home. I was getting all these phone calls, saying, 'Are you okay?', 'Are you okay?' and I am thinking, 'What's going on?'.

It is very stressful with Bradbury's. I got a phone call. I was at work and I saw the fire in the morning. I work at a school; I run the before-care program. We saw the plume of smoke, so I googled it. Then later in the morning, I got a phone call. I am a public housing tenant. A lot of people around this area—that is the other thing—they are public housing tenants. It is a big public housing area. People say, 'Why don't you move away?'. Well, you can't. I am jumping around a bit here, but that is the other thing. Often, on the demographics of the areas, where these sites are placed are very close to those communities that have lots of other issues anyway, so it is again disadvantaging them further. Anyway, I got a phone call from DHHS, to say, 'There's a fire. Are you safe? Where are you? There's a fire at Bradbury's close to where you live'. I said, 'I'm at work. I'm aware of the fire'. But when I spoke to some of my neighbours later on, not everyone got a phone call, so how selectively—you have notified one person but not another person. Either you are notifying everybody or nobody—ideally everybody.

I think it is a big and massive issue and really we have got to be serious about it. There is no use introducing the new EPA laws if they do not act on them. They have got laws and powers now and I do not feel they are fully acting on them or taking them to the nth degree. Laws are one thing but being able to act on them—

There should be penalties across the board and there should be incentives, too. There should be incentives for people, companies and commercial industries that recycle properly. There should be tracking processes so we know at every point in time where a piece of toxic waste is in the system, not just leave it to the ether—

The CHAIR: Ms Tate, just on that point, do you know that as of 1 July that has already been implemented, the electronic tracking system? Were you aware that that came into effect on 1 July?

Ms TATE: No.

The CHAIR: But that is a great point you have raised. From 1 July there is that electronic tracking system for hazardous waste throughout the state, so it has become mandatory.

Ms TATE: Through each step of its process.

The CHAIR: Yes.

Ms TATE: Well, hopefully, because we had a dump just two weeks ago of a truck full of chemicals down in Merri Creek, just down the road, again. This is the thing. It is affecting the environment that we live in, it is affecting our health, everyone. We do not know how we are being affected. It is affecting the climate and this planet is getting pretty screwed, quite frankly. Unless people are genuine and step up and are prepared to not look just at commercial interests and the monetary side of things—we have got to look holistically at the livability side of things because otherwise where are we going to be?

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. I am sorry I have been really rude in interrupting.

Ms TATE: No. That is okay.

The CHAIR: We are running 45 minutes behind schedule. Before I ask members for any questions, if there is anything you can think of that you think you did not present or you forgot, please feel free to shoot us an email and basically we will incorporate that as part of your evidence. Feel free to do that. Do not feel 'I've left something' and 'I should have said that'. Can I ask members to ask questions only if you have got a really burning question and a quick one.

Dr RATNAM: Thank you both very much for your submissions. Ms Tate, I just wanted to ask a quick follow-up question. You mentioned at the beginning of your submission that we are hearing about the big fires but there are incidents more often, more frequently, that are not being reported in the media. Is there anywhere that they are getting reported? Are people documenting these, do you know?

Ms TATE: I do not know. I have tried to track things like just googling them or through MFB. I have got Vic Emergency. Sometimes when things have come up on Vic Emergency I have screen shot. But then there have been things that do not show there. One morning as I was getting ready for work I had numerous firetrucks going down the end of the street. So I went around and could not find them. Later I was told there

was an incident in Maffra Street and they were all there. I do not know if MFB or someone is recording all the smaller incidences as well. It is not just fires; it is spills and leakages as well.

Mr HAYES: One very quick question I just wanted to ask you. You mentioned something being dumped in Merri Creek a couple of weeks ago. Do you mean illegally dumped?

Ms TATE: Yes. What it was was a truck that was filled with drums of chemicals. It was an old truck that had either been driven down there, not in the creek itself, just at the entrance at the end of Barry Road. I have got photos in my phone. Driving around that area, there are a lot of wreckers and there are a lot of old trucks with labels on them. So really anyone can just be filling something up anywhere and pushing it out. That is why I would like you to come out and have a look because if you looked at some of these sites, no-one would know what is in amongst the piles of waste. Because really, who knows, and how does the EPA check what is underneath everything?

Mr FREEMAN: The back streets of the Campbellfield industrial zone are full of rogues—absolutely full of them; they are everywhere. I have seen cars dumped. I have seen vehicles dumped in the Merri Creek—just literally driven into the creek and left there. Fortunately Melbourne Water takes a very responsible and active approach to these things and they arranged to have the things pulled out. But it is bordering on out of control what is going on in the industrial zones of Campbellfield, and I believe that the City of Hume has been asleep at the wheel over it. I do not believe that they feel they are even capable of enforcing their own by-laws.

Ms BATH: I will just go quickly. Thank you, Mr Freeman and Ms Tate. From what I have heard today from both of you, it feels to me like there needs to be a risk analysis. We have heard the fact that there has been storage et cetera next to a petrol station. That just is a red flag for me of concern. So I guess my question is: do you think that in planning there should be some sort of risk profile with these sorts of recycled or storage departments and other facilities' infrastructure?

Ms TATE: Well, that site is illegal storage dumped, so I suppose how do you get planning for that? But I think the planning that needs to be looked is that there are really inadequate buffer zones from residential housing. Realistically if we are going to have things that are storing waste or processing waste, they need to be away from residential zones and businesses and they need to be away from significant environmental areas and creeks and waterways, because it is probably like the gentleman before with the fire. He was saying how the fire went into his business, and he might rebuild there. But you have got the leaching of chemicals. It goes into the soil. The soil is there; the soil is toxic. I have been advised that there is a problem now with the soil they are pulling out of the Metro Tunnel because some of it is so toxic that they do not know where to put it. So what do we do with all this toxic waste, and how do we remediate these areas? Just thinking that you have cleaned up the surface does not mean the toxicity is not there leaching back up.

Dr CUMMING: Thank you, Mr Freeman and Ms Tate, for your submissions today. I would just like to share with you my recent experience in Hawaii and Hawaii council's solution to some of the litter problems and something that we could possibly do.

Mr FREEMAN: Sorry, where was that?

Dr CUMMING: In Hawaii.

Mr FREEMAN: Hawaii, yes.

Dr CUMMING: Their population is 1 million. They are obviously very concerned about litter from streets and garbage bins going into the ocean and polluting their beaches. One of their solutions is that they have clear plastic bags that line all street bins, all household bins and all commercials so they can actually see the rubbish and it is contained. They also have a solution, not dissimilar to councils that had that snap and solve solution where people report overflowing garbage bins so that it does not get into their waterways, their drains and into the beaches.

I would just like to share that as well as the other point that you made earlier, Ms Tate, around the quality of goods. Both of you made similar points around the quality of goods. In Europe they would not allow somewhere like Kmart to make a fan that only lasts one season with wobbly legs and then gets thrown out onto

the street. They have very clear quality standards. If it does not last a product for 10 years, you can actually take it back to that shop and request for it be replaced. It is my belief that if we as a government had similar quality standards that an iron has to last 10 years—it cannot just fall apart—then we would not be in the same situation that we are. Also in Europe too, the Premier this morning brought up the point on radio around how this government—which is very heartening—is looking for proper solutions. He made the point around having those different bins—looking at having a glass bin, looking at having a paper bin, looking at having a bin for plastic and metal and garbage.

The CHAIR: Dr Cumming, is there a question coming?

Dr CUMMING: Not a question, but do you believe that those solutions are things that the Victorian state Parliament should be looking at—solutions from around the world?

Ms TATE: Yes, I think so. Most definitely. There are lots of good practices across the world—I think in Europe and the Scandinavian countries, definitely. So we need to look at that. We need to look at the circular economy. We are seeing industries coming forward now that are utilising plastics and waste. The thing is a lot of these things are valuable resources, and why would you throw effectively what is gold to the tip? It makes no economic sense. So I think the whole area needs a complete rethink.

Ms TAYLOR: Thank you very much for your contributions. I was just looking at the packaging issue that has been flagged here, so do not worry that that has not been covered. It needs to be covered. There are no findings yet, but certainly looking at it nationally because manufacturers are not isolated to states et cetera. Is this just from your observations or is it from reading? I think it is fairly obvious that packaging needs to be improved, but where did you source your information regarding that?

Mr FREEMAN: I did some reading before I put my report together. I have read the SKM report. I have also read China's National Sword policy. I know that you are in a hurry, Chair—

The CHAIR: No, that is all right.

Mr FREEMAN: but I would also like to bring to the attention of the committee that there is a little village in Japan called Kamikatsu that has 45 different categories of recyclable waste. That is the direction that we need to be moving in.

Ms BATH: And not a drop of waste on the ground.

Mr FREEMAN: Zero waste. Only 1700 people live there, but that is a world-class model that I think we should be looking at.

The CHAIR: And if you do not mind, if we can get a copy of that material, that would be great.

Mr FREEMAN: Not at all. I will leave that with you.

The CHAIR: And I think the issue of single-use plastic recycling was raised, and as of 1 November we know there is a total ban on using single-use plastic bags in Victoria, so that is coming.

Ms TATE: That is a start, but we need all single-use plastic out.

The CHAIR: Absolutely. We must do more. So thank you both very much for your contribution, and we really appreciate it. Any further information you would like to supply, please send us an email. Thank you again. We appreciate your time and contribution.

Witnesses withdrew.