

TRANSCRIPT

STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING

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

Melbourne — 20 April 2017

Members

Mr David Davis — Chair

Ms Samantha Dunn

Ms Harriet Shing — Deputy Chair

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Ms Melina Bath

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Mr Richard Dalla-Riva

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Participating Members

Mr Greg Barber

Mr James Purcell

Mr Jeff Bourman

Mr Simon Ramsay

Ms Colleen Hartland

Ms Jaclyn Symes

Witnesses

Mr Keith Chessell (sworn), Technical Team, and

Dr Carol Lawrence (affirmed), National President, Australian Institute of Packaging.

The ACTING CHAIR (Mr Melhem) — Welcome, Dr Carol Lawrence and Keith Chessell. Welcome to committee, and thank you for making yourselves available to address the committee. 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. All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript within the next couple of days. I invite you to make any opening comments or make any presentation that you wish to make prior to the committee asking questions. So I will leave it with you, 5 minutes each or combined 10 minutes, and then we will ask questions. I think you have been sitting out there, so again thank you for your time.

Mr CHESSELL — I will start. The Australian Institute of Packaging, which we represent, is a body of packaging technologists in the industry, so we come with no real agenda in terms of that but to be able to provide the inquiry, we hope, with a balanced input of environmental impact and study. I have been involved in the food and grocery business for 46 years; I am now retired. I am a fellow of the Australian Institute of Packaging, but certainly the last 10 years I have spent trying to advise packaging technologists how to do things more environmentally friendly, how to be more sustainable in their design and aspects. So that is a focus of my current consultancy — to help businesses to do the thing right. I have worked with little shops on how can they do things more environmentally friendly. That is the background that both Carol and myself come from to help to provide some environmental background towards the decisions being considered by the inquiry.

Dr LAWRENCE — Fair to state that the Australian Institute of Packaging, being a national body, has done a lot of work also with the Australian Packaging Covenant. I too have worked in packaging and sustainability for 30 years, and we would genuinely like to just give some light to the bill from a very neutral perspective.

The ACTING CHAIR — Thank you, both. Are you able to give us some sort of example of what is best practice around the world? I think from what you have both said we are all concerned obviously about the environment and we are all concerned about how we can reduce our footprint. So are you able to take us through some sort of best practice you are aware of around the world around packaging and food and vegetables and even carrying plastic bags with the shopping? Are you able to shed some light on that?

Mr CHESSELL — Certainly. I do not know whether you saw *The Project* last night, but they had quite a segment on it, and Waleed was very vocal and showed around the world what nations, both developed and underdeveloped, have banned the bag. So there are a lot of mixed views. A lot of the developed countries have certainly got mixed views, and all we have got to do is look at Australia and see the range of actions that have been taken in Australia.

Certainly one of the main concerns that the AIP and part of the World Packaging Organisation have had as a focus for the last couple of years has been the use of packaging to reduce food waste. Food waste is probably the next major world issue that is being faced by all countries, and Australia really has not done a lot of research in terms of food waste and understanding that. So the Australian Institute of Packaging and many of its members have just instituted awards to encourage businesses to look at how they can reduce food waste — how do we use packaging to be able to do that? So one of the aspects of this bill that is concerned would be banning the bag for the use of fresh fruit and vegetables, which we have seen has a major impact in reducing food waste, and the developments that are occurring now in packaging that will extend shelf life. At our recent awards, the packaging industry awards, we gave one to an avocado producer who has now virtually extended his shelf life from 12 days to 90 days by the use of packaging. He is using that to extend shelf life.

So there are developments and innovations that are happening. Every day I spend probably 2 hours on the internet reading articles. It is pretty boring stuff sometimes, but it is interesting in terms of the developments that are occurring that will reduce food waste and extend shelf life. Your answer to the question ‘What’s happening around the world?’ is that there is a wide variety; there is a lot of development happening now with the use of plastic packaging that will reduce food waste.

The ACTING CHAIR — That is in relation to packaging. What about single-use plastic bags, for example, just simply to carry the shopping from the supermarket? That is another area the bill is looking at addressing. We have, for example, the Aldis of the world who do not use plastic bags anymore. Bunnings do not use them anymore; well, they are there, but you have got to pay for them, whereas it is my understanding that at Aldi they are totally banned. But then other supermarkets still use them. Have you got any thoughts on where as a state we should head: banning these single-use bags; voluntary compliance? What is your view on that?

Dr LAWRENCE — That is a very important distinction, that plastic bags need to be taken totally separately from the plastic that is used for food and vegetables. There are a number of studies. In South Australia banning the use of plastic bags led to a huge increase in the purchase of garbage bags, so that is one thing that we point to. There is also a life-cycle assessment study which compares plastic bags with paper bags and with reusable bags that the consumer takes back many times, and the impact of the single-use plastic bag is minimal when you compare it to all the other options. We have referenced that as a paper that you can read up on in the written submission that we put to you.

Mr CHESSELL — Certainly most of the banning and other actions against plastic bags has been very much a kneejerk reaction in terms of the litter. We are not denying that plastic bags are an enormous litter issue. *The Project* did it very well last night in terms of aspects that the lightweight plastic bag and other plastic packaging are causing to the environment. We do not deny that there is a big issue with that, but our approach in our paper was to say, ‘Is this the best way to approach the issue?’. That is the reaction that has happened globally and in various states, with Aldi compared to Coles, Woolworths and other supermarkets. The different reactions are very much against consumer perception rather than what is the best environmental decision. Part of our paper expresses that right now, other than a couple of instances I can talk you to about, there is no opportunity for consumer households to be able to recycle their single-use plastic bags. We have got the REDcycle scheme that works through Coles, Woolworths and a few of the supermarkets, which allows consumers to take their lightweight plastic bags — not just their shopping bags but bread bags and other bags — back to the store, and they are returned and recycled back to plastic furniture.

The other aspect is that the Victorian government is funding four councils through the metropolitan waste and recovery facilities. When we wrote this there were only two councils, Nillumbik and Moreland, that were undertaking that work, but that has now been extended with the funding in March this year to Boroondara, which happens to be my municipality, so I have got plastic bags that I can now put into my yellow bin.

I was talking only last week with Zandy Powell at Metropolitan Waste to ask how that was going. It is very early days. One of my concerns is that it ends up a litter issue because the consumer can do nothing else with it other than use it for a rubbish bin liner or put it into their rubbish bin. I believe that one of the approaches before looking at banning the bag is to allow not just the four councils that are trialling it but the whole 87 councils around Victoria to allow consumers to put their soft plastic not into rubbish bins but into their yellow bin.

The ACTING CHAIR — Just take me through that and maybe expand on it. You are saying that one of the solutions is that instead of banning shopping plastic bags — let us use that term, whether single use or multiple use — to actually just put them in the yellow bin and then they become recyclable, notwithstanding that people will also continue to use them for their rubbish as well. Is that one of the solutions you are advocating?

Mr CHESSELL — As I said, when they banned plastic bags in South Australia the sale of rubbish bin liners to households went up 80 per cent.

Ms DUNN — Sorry, did you say 7 per cent or 70 per cent?

Mr CHESSELL — Seventy; I think you will read that in the documentation. So consumers need to put their rubbish into something to be able to dispose of it, and all the bins in my household are designed to put a shopping bag in; they are not big bins or big liners. Sometimes you buy rubbish bin liners that are this big for a bin this big, so you are using a whole lot more plastic. Consumers have adapted to the lightweight shopping bag as a very usable way to dispose of their household rubbish.

I would again encourage Metropolitan Waste — and we have been waiting for some time for this — to allow organic waste to be collected. We encourage households to do their own composting, but flats and other facilities do not have anything for organic waste. I think the data says 60 per cent of most household bins is organic waste. That then goes to tips, and without proper compostability we end up getting methane, as we saw with the tip issues seven years ago. At the moment we are getting rid of organic waste by packing it into a plastic bag. One of the things that Waleed did not identify when he said ‘These bags will last for 15 generations’ — which they do — is that when they are landfilled they will keep the material stable and they do not release the methane inside. So the plastic rubbish bag, the lightweight bag, is a useful item for our landfill, but there are other ways we can approach that by reducing what goes to landfill by having organic waste recycling.

The ACTING CHAIR — I think we will always be better off without landfill.

Ms DUNN — Thank you both for your submission today. I guess I am interested in your views in relation to single-use bags and their usefulness as garbage bags because I would suggest that the issues are around this material ending up in our environment, particularly our waterways and our marine environments, and being ingested by marine animals. So I think people who are willing to actually bin their litter are probably not the problem in relation to this. It is more about how do we get packaging out of the environment being an issue. In terms of your presentation it seems that you do not see this as a mechanism to get single-use plastic bags out of our environment. I am not thinking about landfill and recycling; they are actually out in the litter, in the waste.

Dr LAWRENCE — Yes, that is right.

Mr CHESSELL — Yes.

Ms DUNN — You talked about the element of the bill that relates to fresh fruit and vegetable packaging and that that packaging in fact reduces food waste and extends shelf life. I am just wondering: are you talking about the packaging that we see at retailers where you have the trays with the plastic film over the top?

Mr CHESSELL — Yes.

Ms DUNN — So you are suggesting that that packaging reduces food waste and extends shelf life?

Mr CHESSELL — All types you will find in the supermarket. Particularly over the last three years, a large section of what I call the retail supermarkets — the Coles, the Woolworths, the Aldis, the IGAs — have repackaged a lot of their fruit and vegetables into portion packs, portion packs of lettuces and apples. One of the major benefits of that is that it stops the consumer fingering and the damage. If you go to select your apples out of a tray, you say, ‘I might have that one. No, I won’t have that one’.

The ACTING CHAIR — Particularly the avocado.

Mr CHESSELL — Avocados you squeeze. That all ends up as damaged fruit, and the environmental impact of that damaged fruit is huge compared to packaging in the consumer household. Energy to food waste is about 10 per cent; 90 per cent of energy or the environmental impact comes through the wasted produce. That is where the main environmental impact is. Packaging is a very small part of that environmental impact. Part of our presentation today is that the bill looks at banning the plastic bag without looking at what are the best environmental impacts, saying the banning of the plastic bag will stop the waterways damage. I am with you in saying I would love to see no more plastic bags in the waterways — or other plastic packaging. But my suggested approach, because the bag does provide good benefits, is to improve how we recycle those bags to enable consumers not to throw them in the rubbish bin to be blown around but to put them into the recycle bin and that to be able to be recycled effectively.

Ms DUNN — So what evidence do you have that that sort of packaging reduces food waste and extends shelf life?

Mr CHESSELL — We have given you a couple of documentations there, mainly done by RMIT. As I said, there has not been a huge amount of work done, globally even. One of my tasks in helping the World Packaging Organisation was I did a research analysis to try and find articles that would give some detailed documentation. I have given you four references on the back of our report there, mainly from RMIT, which talk of different roles of packaging. The second item which is put out there is ‘Packaging’s role in minimising food loss and waste across the supply chain’. I could certainly forward you those documents if you would like me to do that.

Ms DUNN — That would be terrific. That would be great, thank you. So those studies turn quite specifically to that extension of shelf life and reducing food waste issues?

Mr CHESSELL — Yes, and the benefits of the packaging to be able to do that and how that occurs.

Ms DUNN — Could it be said that it does not matter if your avocado is in a package or not, a consumer is likely to squeeze it to see if it is hard or not?

Mr CHESSELL — Well, it happens that the avocados in the packaging happen to be fourth-grade avocados that they do smashed avocado with and supply that to the food chain. So it is taking avocados that normally would not be sold in retail, that would end up going for oil, and they are converting that through really good processing and packaging and providing avocados to the food chain so you can have your smashed avocados almost all year round.

Ms DUNN — So are they going to retailers in this particular instance?

Mr CHESSELL — There are retail packs available for those smashed avocados, but most of it goes to the food service industry.

Ms DUNN — So in terms of the scope of the bill, it is probably outside the scope of the bill?

Mr CHESSELL — It is outside the scope, yes.

Ms DUNN — In relation to the studies, you have actually given us the references in relation to that garbage bag increase.

Mr CHESSELL — I think the garbage bag increase was actually in the member's second-reading presentation.

Ms DUNN — And is there a reference to that study?

Mr CHESSELL — I have not put it in here, because I was quoting out of the member's document, but I can access that. I think it was a 2012 report by the South Australian government after a period of time of banning the bags. It was a report after that.

Dr LAWRENCE — And the other point on that is that consumers will still purchase their Aldi bag because they need a bag. If that bag ultimately ends up as a rubbish bag, there is a lot more plastic in that bag. It is much heavier than the single-use, very thin lightweight bags that are given out free at Coles and Woolies.

Ms DUNN — In terms of the other study you talked about, which was life cycle and the impact of single-use bags versus other bags, have you given us a reference in relation to that study as well?

Mr CHESSELL — Anything I have referred to would be part of the four reference items there. Which one again are you asking about?

Ms DUNN — You talked about two studies.

Dr LAWRENCE — It is the one that compares paper bags.

Mr CHESSELL — The comparison? Yes.

Ms DUNN — And I think heavier plastics and lighter weight plastics.

Mr CHESSELL — Yes, that is part of the RMIT and Birubi report, which is report number 1 on our sheet, which is *Evaluating the Sustainable Impacts of Packaging: The Plastic Carry Bag Dilemma*.

Dr LAWRENCE — And we could follow up.

Ms DUNN — Do you know if those two studies were peer reviewed?

Dr LAWRENCE — Yes, they would have been by RMIT. I am confident of that. We can follow up with the full copies of those reports.

Ms DUNN — That would be terrific. Thank you for that. That would be great. You may or may not have this information, but I am trying to get a sense of imported plastic bags versus locally produced plastic bags. In terms of the market for single-use plastic bags, how many of those are imported from overseas and how many are produced locally and what might the quantum of that even be?

Mr CHESSELL — No, I am sorry, I do not have that data.

Ms DUNN — Do you have any idea where we might find that out? It seems to be one of the sixty-four-dollar questions.

Mr CHESSELL — We have got lots of members who will probably be able to help you do that.

Ms DUNN — It is how many are imported and how many are locally manufactured.

Mr CHESSELL — You are talking about the single-use bags.

Ms DUNN — Yes. Has your organisation looked at alternative forms of packaging to plastics at all? And if it has, what sort of work have you done in that area?

The ACTING CHAIR — What type of plastic?

Ms DUNN — What types of plastic or other — —

Mr CHESSELL — Certainly the reports are there. From the first report we talked about the single-use plastic bag has the lowest environmental footprint other than the reusable bag. In the document we have quoted in there, the reusable bag was found to have a lower environmental impact than all of the single-use bags. The green bag, which we would see as being reusable, has a lower environmental impact than the lightweight plastic bag, but it depends on how many times it gets used. If you look at it on a two-year basis, it has a better environmental footprint.

Ms DUNN — That is right; the more you reuse it the greater the benefit.

Mr CHESSELL — Yes. If it is only used for one year, the single-use plastic bag has a better environmental footprint than the green bag. The data says that the single-use plastic bag that we use now is strong enough. You can bet that the Coles and Woolworths of this world have so designed that bag that they are spending the least amount of money they need to, but you need to be able to safely carry home your material. That is part of my concerns, because I am a male shopper and I forget to take the green bag to the shops. So when I get there, what am I going to use? The lightweight bag for me is a lifesaver. But Carol is a green bag user. She is very faithful, and I need to be a better environmental person and make sure I take the reusable bag. The reusable bag, if it is used over more than 12 months, certainly has a better environmental impact than the single-use bag. The single-use bag is not far behind, but the single-use bag ends up as a litter item. How we reduce litter items is really what we are suggesting to the government may be a far better approach — to encourage all councils to start looking at providing their households with recyclability in the yellow bins of those bags to stop them getting into the waste stream.

Ms DUNN — In terms of looking at those environmental benefits and costs, was the issue around the fact that fossil fuels are used as part of the component of manufacturing those bags versus, say, a reusable calico bag, factored in at all?

Dr LAWRENCE — Most of the reusable bags are not calico. They are actually made out of the same polymers. They are typically polypropylene or PMC.

Ms DUNN — Yes, I know, and that is its own environmental problem because of the microfibres that end up in our environment and subsequently in our food chain. That is why I mentioned calico as a sustainable alternative to that. I guess I am wondering, in terms of weighing up environmental issues, has the issue of greenhouse emissions and using petroleum-based products been part of that assessment.

Mr CHESSELL — Of the factors that go into that life cycle assessment, normally we look at seven factors that go from energy use to water use to what they call eutrophication, which is the spreading out of nutrients into waterways and the algae growth. It looks at the whole seven aspects. When they do a life cycle assessment on packaging — different forms of packaging, whether it be a single use bag, a multi-use bag, a calico bag or a paper bag — they look at all those seven items in terms of environmental impact. Some items vary in terms of what they contribute. But what we have said is the single-use paper bag — if we ban the plastic bag and we went to paper bags — was found to have the highest impact or the equally highest impact for all categories, including the LCA, on the environment except for eutrophication. The paper bag would be the worst alternative from an environmental aspect for us to move to if we banned the single-use plastic bag.

Ms DUNN — And so conversely, what would the best bag be?

Mr CHESSELL — The best bag would be the green bag.

Ms DUNN — Not a calico bag?

Mr CHESSELL — Calico, in terms of the material.

Ms DUNN — Because at least it is not synthetic.

Mr CHESSELL — Yes. The developments that are happening now with renewable resource materials is amazing — what is happening every day of being able to take mushroom straw, waste from coconut shells and turn them into renewable resources. That development is happening. Part of the issue is that if you ban some of these things it takes away the innovation. Part of the challenge, I believe, ongoing is to find that. We do need some sort of item to carry our bags home. What is the best innovation? I do not know the answer to that right now, but at the moment the green bag or the single-use plastic bag is the most environmentally friendly option available to us. But that will change.

Dr LAWRENCE — But it is also important, I believe, to make a distinction, say, between your Coles or Woolies bag compared to your Myer or your David Jones bag —

Ms DUNN — Yes, in terms of the micron weight.

Dr LAWRENCE — because you have got the weight of plastic. It is huge.

Ms DUNN — I know overseas there is a lot of effort being put into developing a circular economy in relation to cradle to grave to cradle again, and really that is about maximising recovery and reuse of components and not using raw materials. Are you aware of any of that sort of thinking that has been factored into design research and innovation in Australia at all?

Mr CHESSELL — Yes, certainly that is happening. Part of our submission that Carol made mention of before is that the Australian Packaging Covenant organisation, as part of their signatory agreements, are working towards encouraging all that development that will look at the total life cycle of use of material. Part of the concerns that we have expressed in here about a state-by-state change — —

Ms DUNN — Is that it is state by state?

Mr CHESSELL — State-by-state does not assist. It really does not, as they said on *The Project* last night — I think three of the states — quoting Mr Andrews as saying he wants a national decision. We are concerned at its being a state-by-state issue. It is far better to have a national one that will link in with the Australian Packaging Covenant organisation, because they have goals there. They have been set up to make sure that we do things together and that the best alternatives are looked at rather than — I will choose my words — a kneejerk reaction of banning a bag because it will solve a problem. I think I went through the ‘throwing out the baby with the bathwater’ phase, the idiomatic saying of losing something that is good to fix a problem that is bad.

There is not anything I would say that would change the issue that the lightweight plastic bag is a major issue in our environment, but we have got to stop it getting into the environment. That is what I am suggesting. It provides a very economic and good life-cycle environmental bag, but the problem is to stop it getting into the environment, and that is why we should be seeing councils nationally enabling households to recycle those bags.

Part of the exercise, too, that helps is that there has got to be an end use to the material they produce — furniture, bollards, all sorts of things — so there needs to be a market for that. At the moment that needs to be, perhaps from a government point of view, encouraged through their own agencies the reuse of that material. As that is stimulated, that encourages others to say, ‘Hang on, I’ll start recycling this’, because there is an economic return. So encourage councils to collect, but there also needs to be a forward market to be able to use the material that is then collected and turned into other plastic products.

Dr LAWRENCE — There are other small plastic items like straws and the lids from milkshakes et cetera. They are soft enough to be collected by the councils within these large plastic bags. In fact I do many beach cleans, and it is straws and lids of water bottles — they are the kind of things that I pick up on a weekly basis, not carrier bags.

Ms DUNN — In terms of the national packaging covenant you talked about as being a good approach, and it is a national approach, as a way forward that looks at the total life cycle, I am just wondering what the compliance regime is around that covenant in terms of: if that becomes a reality, what is the way of providing assurances that that is actually happening? Is there a compliance mechanism?

Mr CHESSELL — They were given new teeth in about October last year with the environmental ministers reforming and putting in place the new packaging covenant association and their new guidelines. They have been given certainly a stronger opportunity there to make sure their signatories comply with those requirements.

Ms DUNN — So that is through a federal mechanism?

Mr CHESSELL — That is federal, yes.

Ms DUNN — So it would not be devolved back out to the states again?

Mr CHESSELL — The federal environment ministers meet and review so that board, the Australian Packaging Covenant, reports in through the environmental ministers.

Ms DUNN — But any compliance activities in relation to the covenant — are they undertaken at a state level or a federal level?

Mr CHESSELL — At a federal level.

The ACTING CHAIR — Thank you both for your contribution. We really appreciate both your submission and presentation. Today has been very insightful, so thank you very much.

Mr CHESSELL — Thank you. We will forward you on that extra information.

Ms DUNN — That is terrific.

Witnesses withdrew.