Peel Preservation Group Inc.

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PPG is a non-profit organisation devoted to the conservation of the natural environment in the Peel Region of Western Australia

Hon. Stephen Dawson MLC
Minister for the Environment
2 Havelock Street
West Perth WA 6005
Email: Minister.Dawson@dpc.wa.gov.au

9 July 2019

RE: SINGLE-USE PLASTIC AND PLASTIC WASTE

The Peel Preservation Group has previously forwarded two submissions to the Minister for the Environment regarding banning single-use plastic bags (24/07/17) as well as banning plastic drinking straws and balloons (22/02/18). The State Government is to be commended for introducing the ban on single-use plastic bags that were being freely distributed by supermarkets. However, given the inordinate amount of non-biodegradable plastic waste and refuse that finds its way into our waterways and landfill there is still a lot more that needs to be done, both in terms of government regulations as well as consistent public education. As mentioned in our "Plastic Bag Ban" submission of 24/07/2017, it was then estimated that Australians were using 4 billion plastic bags every year. We trust that there has now been a significant reduction in plastic bag use since Australian State governments have introduced the relevant supermarket bans.

In addition to recent legislation, our group holds the strong view that the larger and thicker "reusable" plastic bags that can be purchased at supermarkets, or sometimes given out freely at other shopping outlets, also need to be banned or at the very least phased out by a strong awareness campaign about the intractable problems associated with a material that simply doesn't break down in any short or medium time frame. Current scientific research informs us that plastic doesn't decompose but instead it becomes micro and nano particles which then become part of the toxic food chain, with the potential to disrupt the human endocrine (hormone) system and likely to cause other long-term health effects on organisms in our ecosystem that are not clearly well known at this stage.

Overall our group is very concerned about the use of plastic bags of all types, plastic drinking straws and cups, plastic food packaging, microbeads in body care products (the voluntary ban has not worked) and micro-fibres in clothing.

There is no good rational and responsible reason for so called “reusable” plastic bags to be readily distributed by shopping outlets when there are a number of environmentally friendly alternatives that are available, and which, hearteningly, now seem to be embraced by many in the community since the single-use plastic bag ban was introduced.

Our group is in the midst of writing to retailers at Mandurah shopping centres in regard to reducing plastic packaging, but we are also heartened by some of the positive moves that have recently been put in place, especially moving away from plastic drinking straws to more viable alternatives. Some smaller shops in our community and also our local cinema have introduced non-plastic drinking straws and deserve to be commended for their environmental responsibility.

While initiatives from the community are a positive leap forward, government regulations and programs are crucially vital. Some initiatives can only be conducted through major government programs such as the Container Deposit Scheme, which has been a long time coming but deserves the loud applause from all environmental groups. Hence our group is keen for more governmental action and regulation on all plastic bags and all plastic packaging.

The evidence against plastic waste continues to accumulate almost as fast as the vast conglomeration of floating refuse that is known as the “Great Pacific Garbage Patch”. However, in the recently published book “Plastic Soup”, oceanographer Michiel Roscam Abbing points out that only 0.5% of plastic floats, which means that micro-plastics and nano-plastics are breaking down in the ocean to a “soup” which is all too readily consumed by sea life. Recent studies estimate that humans ingest up to 211,000 pieces of micro-plastic every year, again with biological consequences that are very unclear now. Plastic is not part of our historic human diet hence our least conservative response needs to be one of serious concern.

The amount of “plastic soup” in our own local environment has become very clear to our group since we purchased and installed two Seabins in one of our local marinas last year. The Seabin is emptied every day and regularly contains at least several handfuls of small plastic particles, some of which are only a few millimetres in length. Please see photos below.

Our final concern regarding plastic that may require government action and regulation soon relates to microbeads and plastic fibres in human clothing that regularly find their way into our waterways and then become part of the “Plastic Soup”. I was rather surprised and somewhat enlightened to hear on a recent ABC Q&A “science special” episode that 90% of plastic micro-fibres in clothing could be prevented from entering our waterways if all washing machines had appropriate filters. We have the technology; we need the action to follow through.

Australian scientists are often at the forefront of technological breakthroughs and innovations across the board, but we also have the potential to be environmental leaders. Hence CSIRO and other related environmental organisations deserve all the funding they get, and more.

In summary, our group is very supportive of all government regulations and initiatives to ban or phase out all single-use plastics, but we also have the strong view that the thicker “reusable” plastic bags also warrant government action.

Yours sincerely

Melvyn J. Tuckey
Committee member
Peel Preservation Group

Cc David Templeman MLA, Member for Mandurah
Department of Water and Environmental Regulation

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