

Publishers Response to the Victorian government options paper:
“Waste and recycling legislation and governance”



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Executive Summary

Australia’s newspaper and magazine publishers represented by ThinkNewsBrands support the leadership demonstrated by Australia’s governments in addressing the current recycling crisis. Publishers appreciate this opportunity to comment on the Victorian Government’s options paper on “Waste and recycling legislation and governance” and welcome many of the reforms being considered. Publishers have concerns about the issue of state based product stewardship schemes and strongly support a national approach.

Background

Recycling of newspapers is an Australian success story. We are among the best in the world with 68 per cent of newspapers recycled in 2019, a massive improvement from 28 per cent in the late 1980s.

Australian newspaper and magazine publishers, together with Australia’s newsprint manufacturer Norske Skog Australia (NSA), have played our part in this success. We are committed to advancing recycling and delivering positive outcomes for the environment. Our voluntary Product Stewardship Agreement on waste and recycling, the “National Environmental Sustainability Agreement” (NESA) has been in place since 1992. This is endorsed by the federal government, as well as all state and territory governments. The next agreement that runs from FY2021-2025 is currently before governments for endorsement.

Members of ThinkNewsBrands Environment Advisory Group include the following:

- News Corp Australia
- Nine
- Seven West Media
- Are Media

Principles that underpin successful recycling

Publishers have supported the following principles that underpin their plan to advance recycling:

- 1) **National Scope:** Sustainable sourcing and economic recovery and reuse of newsprint must remain market based and enacted nationally. Overly restrictive requirements, “red tape” or the implementation of state-by-state initiatives will lead to confusion, contradictions, administrative problems and ultimately less desirable outcomes. Adequate economies of scale and operating efficiencies are essential to a sustainable outcome.

- 2) **Market driven:** Newspaper and magazine recycling must be market driven to be sustainable. Inappropriate recycling legislation, targets or penalties result in economic distortions that lead to market failure and unsustainable outcomes.
- 3) **No legislation is required:** The industry is voluntarily endorsing and extending an agreement format that has delivered world-class paper recycling for more than 28 years and makes mandated action unnecessary.
- 4) **Recovery and re-use are paramount:** The publishers and NSA remain wholly committed to the sustainable production, recovery and reuse of newspapers and magazines
- 5) **Optimum Source Separation:** To achieve the optimum quality and utilisation of recovered newspapers and magazines, source separation is the preferred method of collection. It minimises contamination and improves value to local governments and processors.

These principles were embedded in the original 1992 Newsprint Producer/Publisher Group National Environmental Sustainability Agreement which continues to this day. The validity of these principles has become even more important as global recycling markets continue to re-align in response to the China import ban.

Commitments

Publishers encourage government to underpin the viability of recycling by supporting education, harmonisation, and useful grants that facilitate improvement in the quality of materials collected in recycling systems. Indeed, publishers have done just that since 1992, when they agreed to long term contracts for newsprint containing recycled fibre, subject to normal cost and quality issues. This commercial arrangement underpinned the construction of the Albury Newsprint Deinking and Recycling Mill, Australia's first newsprint manufacturing facility that turned old newspapers and magazine back into new newsprint. Newsprint with recycled fibre was at that time an unknown—untried and untested—quantity, but the investment in the future was made.

With this huge capital outlay in excess of \$135 million undertaken, the newsprint manufacturer and the publishers had to create a guaranteed flow of recovered newspapers.

This was done by:

- a) The newsprint manufacturer setting up a company called Kerbside Papers to stand in the market at fixed prices and offer long-term contracts to local councils and collectors for recovered newspaper, and
- b) The publishers creating an Interim Support Fund to advance recycling while the Albury Newsprint Deinking and Recycling Mill was constructed and began operations in 1995. The publishers contributed \$2 million a year for the three years leading up to the commissioning of the de-inking plant to support the recovery and re-use of newspapers.

This \$6 million was made available to any undertaking or project endorsed by the Commonwealth and state environmental agencies and went to local government, state governments, researchers and private firms. Over 100 projects, all funded by publishers, have been supported, from using old newspaper to produce fibre for home insulation and for kitty litter production was developed, and export quality paper baling machinery was given to Local Government .

The publishers also encouraged community involvement in kerbside recycling by making free advertising space available each year to the Commonwealth and state governments to promote newspaper recycling. This commitment continues to this day.

It is with much disappointment that we now see the closure of the Albury recycling mill this year. With energy costs high and newsprint markets shrinking the mill is no longer viable. More than ever, safeguarding alternative recycling markets are available for collected newspapers depends on ensuring the quality of collected materials remains acceptable, something that we have been advocating tirelessly since we started our commitment to advancing recycling.

Publishers' support options to advance recycling and waste management

Publishers' support the following raised in the options paper to advance recycling and waste management:

1. Formation of a Waste Authority, the principles outlined under which it will operate and its functions in the following key areas:
 - a. consistent recycling and waste practices
 - b. strengthening councils' contribution to improving performance of the system
 - c. ensuring providers contribute to Victoria's waste and recycling goals
2. Setting minimum standards for household waste and recycling services. This will involve standardisation of recycling and waste bins, something publishers have been asking for to improve household's ability to understand and contribute to recycling effectiveness by improving source separation

Key challenges include:

- a. If it cannot be recycled, then it should not be collected in a general household recycling bin.
- b. Keeping problematic materials separate. Victoria has been a leader in recognising glass may be better collected separately from other recyclables in the yellow-top kerbside bin. Clean glass suitable for recycling is collected in Container Deposit Schemes and drop off containers for non-CDS glass such as wine bottles and jars could be added to CDS sites to capture the additional glass previously collected from household collections.
- c. Recycling bin contamination can be reduced by an increase in the size of household garbage bins. The trial in the Hunter Region in NSW showed

reducing garbage bins from 240 litre to 120 litre resulted in the doubling of contamination from 7.5 per cent to 15 per cent. This could be reversed in Victoria to advance recycling. The cost of household recycling is primarily the cost of bin lifts, which remains close to the same with almost any bin size.

3. Separation of waste for recycling. Businesses will be required to separate waste for recycling from 2025, a practise publisher support and have been committed to for many years. Major newspaper print sites in Australia recycle more than 90 percent of their waste and meet the [Zero Waste Alliance](#) criteria for Zero Waste.
4. Publishers strongly support the process of education to advance recycling. The paper outlines education responsibilities for Local Government. Publishers see this as needing to include not just support from the proposed Waste Authority, but the Authorities own active engagement in education. Informing Australians about what can and cannot be effectively recycled is essential to raising the quality of recyclables collected from households. Collecting only those materials that can be effectively recycled is fundamental. The adage: “If in doubt, throw it out” provides guidance that helps stop problematic materials, which lower the quality and value of recyclables, from entering the recycling stream. Publishers look forward to working with governments to address this communication challenge and this action forms a core commitment in our product stewardship agreement the “National Environmental Sustainability Agreement” (NESA).
5. Better waste and recycling data is strongly supported. Publishers have been providing accurate statistics on newspaper recycling since 1990 in order to allow reliable decisions to be made to advance recycling.
6. The state landfill levy will be reviewed with the aim of aligning to other states. It is hoped that this provides some certainty and standardisation for waste management and for business. However, it is hoped that exorbitant landfill levies are not the result as this may hamper both general industry and the establishment of waste and recycling infrastructure.
7. The Waste Act will legislate Victoria’s Container Deposit Scheme (CDS). Something publishers have been supporting for some time as it effectively underpins household recycling schemes.
8. National extended Producer Responsibility schemes are supported by publishers but there are concerns about mandated recycling targets for specific product sectors. This is particularly problematic in reference to the raised issue of “state-based product stewardship schemes”. A national, voluntary approach should be employed as a first step. Consideration for rapidly changing market circumstances needs to be properly factored in.
9. Waste to Energy is raised as a future policy direction and publishers see this as an essential component to managing waste in line with the waste hierarchy. Recyclables that are contaminated and unable to find markets are being landfilled in Australia.

The introduction of waste-to-energy facilities would allow Australia to potentially avoid landfilling up to 80 per cent of its waste. Contaminated recyclables would return value as energy rather than sitting in landfill. Cost-effective base load power would be provided to the electricity grid, displacing technologies with higher and more polluting emissions and effectively underpinning any transition to intermittent renewable technologies.

Conclusion

Australia's major newspaper and magazine publishers support the proposed Waste Authority and government leadership on advancing recycling and waste management.

Much of what is proposed in the Victorian options paper is supported. Publishers have serious concerns that product stewardship is best dealt with nationally, rather than by introducing uncoordinated state-based schemes.

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