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<https://www.smh.com.au/national/australia-warned-it-must-expand-plastic-recycling-by-up-to-400-per-cent-20200124-p53uft.html>

Australia warned it must expand plastic recycling by up to 400 per cent

By Jewel Topsfield

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A report commissioned by the federal government found that **just 9.4 per cent of plastic was recycled in 2017-2018.**

Australia has been warned it needs to boost its local plastics recycling industry.

It said **the local plastics recycling sector was now smaller than it was in 2005.**

The report said meeting the national target for 70 per cent of Australia's plastic packaging to be recycled or composted by 2025 would require a "major" expansion of plastics recycling.

The 70 per cent target is one of the national packaging targets agreed to by federal and state governments in 2018.

Last year, Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced export bans on waste plastic, paper, glass and tyres to tackle the amount of rubbish in the world's oceans.

The announcement followed growing tensions in the region over the issue, with Indonesia becoming the first south-east Asian nation to send contaminated plastic waste back to Australia.

But the report's author, Peter Allan, told The Age he thought these export bans - to be phased in from July this year - were a "big mistake".

"It takes away any competition for local paper and glass recyclers and could put more pressure on our ability to find markets for recyclables," said Mr Allan, the director of Sustainable Resource Use.

"It would be better to ban the export of recyclables that don't meet strict specifications."

Australia's waste industry was thrown into turmoil in 2018 when China banned 24 types of waste and instituted a tough 0.5 per cent contamination threshold for all waste imports.

Contamination can mean the recyclable material is dirty or contains other materials incorrectly mixed in with the bales.

About **30 per cent of the waste sent to Cleanaway recycling has to be sent to landfill because it is either contaminated or rubbish.** This is how to keep your recycling simple.

"In an environment of constrained export markets for some plastics, the need to dramatically increase local plastic reprocessing is seen as crucial," the Recycling Market Situation report says.

"That expansion may need to be a 400 per cent increase in throughput."

The Department of Environment and Energy commissioned the report to review opportunities to grow markets in recycled glass, plastics, rubber, paper and cardboard.

The report says achieving the 70 per cent target would require a "significant increase" in plastic packaging recycling from its current level of 27.6 per cent.

Assistant Minister for Waste Management Trevor Evans said finding a sustainable way to manage plastics was a major challenge.

"Given its current low recovery rate, there is a significant task ahead of us as a country to reach the 70 per cent recycled or composted target," Mr Evans said.

"We'll need all players – governments, industry and consumers – to pull together to reach the goal, but it's important for our environment that we do what's necessary to achieve this goal."

A spokesperson for Mr Evans said the 2025 National Packaging Targets were a priority for government and industry and were on track to be delivered on schedule.

The Sustainable Resource Use report says local and global markets for recyclable materials were all volatile in 2019, mostly due to the import restrictions imposed by China and then other Asian nations.

Stockpiling had become a significant issue across the country and was particularly acute in Victoria following the collapse of recycling giant SKM.



Piles of recycling stockpiled by SKM

"Over the next few months it appears likely that significant quantities of kerbside commingled recyclables, previously going to SKM, will be disposed to landfill (possibly around 10,000-20,000 tonnes/month)," the report says.

Environment ministers agreed in November all waste glass exports would be banned by July 2020; mixed waste plastics by July 2021; tyres by December 2021, and remaining waste products, including mixed paper and cardboard, by June 30, 2022.

The Australian Council of Recycling said it had long argued the 70 per cent plastic packaging recycling target would require massive market change to be achieved given current low levels of plastic recycling.

"The target becomes even more difficult now that Asian markets are about to be essentially closed to local industry and councils," CEO Pete Shmigel said.

He said getting to 70 per cent required policy innovation, such as providing direct incentives for the purchase of products with recycled content.

The report says a proportion of mixed plastic packaging is reprocessed locally and used to make outdoor equipment and building materials.

“If governments and others buy more of the end products, there is an ability for the companies to take in more material for recycling,” it says.

“There are also calls for funding assistance to support new reprocessing infrastructure and modifications to sorting and collection systems.”

A \$20 million plastics recycling plant - which processes small plastic flakes which it sells to manufacturers - was opened in Melbourne’s north by Advanced Circular Polymers in June last year.

“There is a recognition that government and major brands have a role in procuring recycled content product in order to create the market pull,” the report says