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Committee Secretary

Agriculture and Environment Committee

Parliament House

George Street

Brisbane Qld 4000

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## **Waste Reduction and Recycling Amendment Bill 2017**

Dear Secretary,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comment on the Waste Reduction and Recycling Amendment Bill 2017. Wildlife Queensland and our member organisations support this bill, that proposes to ban lightweight plastic bags and introduces a Container Refund Scheme into Queensland.

With these measure scheduled for introduction in July 2018, we urge their timely passage through the Parliament to allow sufficient time for the preparation and set up arrangements for both initiatives.

### **A Ban on Lightweight Plastic Bags in Queensland**

Plastic bags are wasteful and deadly. They are a major litter and wildlife problem in Queensland. Although not a huge component in litter statistics, their impact on wildlife is immeasurable, whilst visually they are a major source of public complaint and annoyance.

With about 1 billion plastic bags used in Queensland every year and over 16 million estimated to be littered, the ban will have a much needed outcome. The majority of plastic bags end up in landfill. This is not a preferred option as they clog up landfills and complicate the efficient processing of wastes. They also represent a major problem for recycling facilities where they can block machinery. Ironically, landfill

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represents the largest point source for plastic bag litter.

Their nature, being easily picked up by the wind, allows their escape from landfill, shopping centres and public places. Their movement in the breeze means they can easily get into rivers, creeks and the marine environment. It is here that they are exposed to the many birds, animals and reptiles who get entangled or mistake them for food.

Banning the use of plastic bags is an easy and obvious option to reduce litter and wildlife threats. There are readily available alternatives to the use of plastic bags. The first is to avoid the option of using a bag whilst shopping, the next is to bring a reusable bag to the shops. Many retailers also offer alternatives such as paper bags, used boxes or reusable bags for a fee.

Jurisdictions that have banned plastic bags report a dramatic reduction in plastic bag litter, notably from their landfill sites. They also report a change in behaviour by consumers when not given the option of a plastic bag.

Queensland can now join a long list of countries and regions who have banned the bag (or introduced a levy on their use). These include jurisdictions in Europe, America, Asia and Africa.

The first country to ban the bag was Bangladesh, who banned the bag because they blocked drains in that flood-prone country. The banning of the bag in Queensland will also have that benefit of reducing blockages in rivers and creeks in this State.

### **Our Perspective on the Proposed Plastic Bag Ban**

Wildlife Queensland supports the introduction a ban on lightweight plastic bags. The bag ban that pertains to bags of < 35 microns in thickness is consistent with other jurisdictions who have banned the bag.

A concern is that some retailers may decide to undermine the ban by providing slightly thicker bags above 35 microns in thickness. This has occurred in a number of other jurisdictions. In this instance, the Government has included an additional clause (1) *the thickness as prescribed in regulation*. This device will allow the Government to alter the thickness of a banned bag, should a retailer seek to provide these.

Wildlife QLD takes the view that plastic bags up to a 70-micron thickness are problematic and should, in reality all be banned. However, we accept this compromise as long as the Government makes clear that this clause exists and commits to acting in the eventuality that the ban is being undermined through the provision of thicker bags by retailers.

Our position also includes the banning of lightweight, so called 'degradable or biodegradable' bags. The proposed ban correctly includes both 'degradable and biodegradable' bags in the ban. Degradable bags are designed to break into smaller pieces and resemble food for wildlife even more than standard plastic bags as a result. Biodegradable bags contain agents to slow down their decomposition when in contact with liquid-so that they can be useful as a carrier bag. This means that they

decompose slowly in the marine environment. Some experts estimate it takes up to two years to decompose. By that time, they have already done the damage.

Because they are 'biodegradable' they tend to be littered more as consumers think that they are okay to discard, because they are biodegradable!

The Queensland Government has indicated it will take a lead in pursuing a Voluntary Code of Practice by Retailers to reduce thicker, supermarket style plastic bags. Wildlife Queensland believes that such a Code of Practice needs to be made public with clear and stated objectives on when these bags will be reduced and by what extent. This should be made publicly available prior to the proposed QLD bag ban.

Public and retailer education is vital to the acceptance and understanding of a plastic bag ban. We note that funding has been allocated in the 2017-18 State budget for this purpose and that the National Retailers Association has been engaged to deliver a retailer education program. A comprehensive public education program needs to be also instigated, as soon as the legislation can pass through the Parliament.

Promotion to assist the public adhere to the ban should also be introduced. This example from the UK where a national levy on plastic bags is in force. A typical sign from the ban in South Australia 2009



Typical signage in car park outside Sainburys supermarket, England.



Typical signage in lead up to SA Plastic Bag Ban 2009

## Additional Comments

### Helium Balloons



Discarded helium balloons and strings-Moreton Bay

Wildlife Queensland seeks the inclusion of the mass release of helium balloons into the legislation. This is appropriate given the scope and purpose of the legislation.

Many in our community don't realise the dire consequences of releasing helium-filled balloons and their impacts on native wildlife. The fact is that these balloons tend to fracture and burst in the atmosphere and fall back to earth. The remnants of balloons and any associated strings and ribbons resemble food to wildlife causing them to be eaten or get entangled.

Wildlife researchers have estimated that over 70% of plastic found inside dead pelagic turtles in Moreton Bay were balloons. Dr Jenn Lavers, from the Institute of Marine and Antarctic Studies, says she finds balloons "in about one in 20 of every sea bird I examine".

Most helium-filled balloons are not biodegradable, and even the ones that claim to be, degrade very slowly, by which time they have often been eaten by animals, reptiles or birds or become entangled with wildlife.

Mass releases of helium-filled balloons is also opposed by the State Government and many local Councils in Queensland.

We note that, following the discovery of a branded helium balloon in an endangered albatross on Fraser Island, Retail First, a major shopping centre chain, banned the sale of helium balloons from their shopping centres.

Releasing helium balloons leads to littering, an offence under Queensland law but the offence only happens when the balloons land, when it is impossible to know who released them. A simple change to make deliberately releasing helium balloons an offence, will save the lives of thousands of sea birds and marine animals and reptiles. This change is consistent with legislation introduced in NSW in 2000.

### Bait Bags

Bait bags represent a major litter problem as they are often discarded at fishing spots by some fishers. There are an estimated 3 million used in Australia annually.

There have been proposals to provide bait in biodegradable bags but this practice has never eventuated. However, the problem with biodegradable bait bags is that they would be seen as 'environmentally friendly' and therefore more likely to be littered. As previously outlined 'biodegradability' does not mean a product is safe or will decompose quickly.

We support the practice of using re-usable containers for bait. These could either be self-provided by fishers or provided by bait shops with a take-back scheme put in place. Bait bags should be included in the current ban measure.

Again given the scope of the legislation, the inclusion bait bags in the ban would reduce a major source of avoidable plastic littering.

### **Next Steps**

There are growing and justifiable concerns about the extent and impact of plastics on the environment, in particular the marine environment. Recent studies have concluded that 95% of plastic packaging is used once and then discarded as waste or litter\*

*\*New Plastics Economy-Elle MacArthur Foundation/World Economic Forum 2017*

This packaging includes plastic bags, containers, helium balloons and bait bags. It includes plastic film and wrappers, food trays, plastic food ware, cups and plates. These are all categorised as disposable, single use items, that are routinely and unnecessarily thrown away. The need to change our habits on disposable plastics must change.

Major events such as the Woodford Folk Festival (provides only reusable or compostable food ware) and the Gold Coast Commonwealth Games (have banned plastic bags, plastic film and reduced plastic use) along with countless progressive markets and events are already acting. They need the backing and support of the Parliament to extend their good work and make this common practice.

This legislation could signal a new intent by the Parliament to begin to address single use plastics. The Government has already signalled its intention to consider a *Plastic Pollution Reduction Plan* that would identify and propose policies and change practices to the use and management of single use plastics.

The legislation should confirm the establishment of a Government Taskforce, that includes key stakeholders, to advise and prepare a report to Parliament within 12 months on options to reduce Queensland's plastic footprint.

### **Container Refund Scheme**

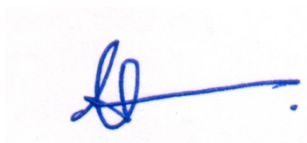
Wildlife Queensland welcomes the proposed introduction of a container refund scheme in July 2018. As a member organisation, we endorse the comments of the Boomerang Alliance, in its submission to the Committee on this matter.

Specifically:

- The scope includes all glass, plastic, aluminium and LPB beverage containers between 150ml and 3 litres, these will have a 10 cent refund applied. Milk, some fruit juice and health tonics are exempted. We question why beer bottles are included but wine and spirits are not included in the scheme. Wine bottles, in particular, are common in litter and their exclusion creates an unfair advantage over other alcoholic beverages
- The scheme should be world's best practice with a recovery and recycling target trending up to > than 95% and set in regulation. To achieve this target most collection points, need to be situated at retail outlets where it is most convenient for people to return containers. Consequently, the involvement of retail (above a certain size) should be mandated.
- The use of barcodes should be the primary means to verify refund containers on collection. Manual counting would be allowable, where automation is impractical. We absolutely oppose the use of a weight formula to calculate container collections from public sources as it will inevitably be inaccurate and open to abuse
- All communities should have reasonable access to collection points to redeem refunds as defined by regulation. Collection points include, reverse vending machines at retail outlets, council and community drop-off centres, kerbside recycling bins and donation points run by NFP organisations
- Beverage suppliers should pay the scheme Coordinator any required funds based on supply/sales (in advance) not on claims made by collectors, so that the scheme always has cash in the bank and is financially viable
- Any excess funds received by the Scheme Coordinator should be used to improve the scheme and community environment projects. They should not be returned to bottlers.
- All collected cans and bottles should be reused or recycled within a specified period (two years) or have refunds and handling fees returned
- The scheme should be regularly reviewed with improvements introduced, including an increase in the refund if recovery targets are not met and penalties on bottlers

Wildlife Queensland is happy to attend and provide witness testimony to the Committee on matters raised in this submission.

Signed



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