



Our recycling could soon be headed for landfill

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Australia's recycling system has been thrown into crisis, with the very real possibility that some of our recyclable waste could soon be headed for landfill.

VIRGINIA TRIOLI, PRESENTER: For decades now, Australians have embraced curb-side recycling in the belief that our waste was actually going somewhere to be reused.

What is perhaps less well-known is that the somewhere was China for about half of the recyclable rubbish Australians produce - but not anymore.

This year, China has declared it no longer wants to be the world's dumping ground.

And this reality has thrown Australia's recycling system into crisis, with the very real possibility that our recycled waste will be heading for landfill here soon.

Geoff Thompson reports.

(Footage of plastic, glass and cardboard placed in a household recycling bin. The waste is deposited in an outdoors municipal recycling 'wheelie-bin'. The bin is rolled out onto the nature strip out front of the property)

GEOFF THOMPSON, REPORTER: It is a rhythm that Australians have gotten used to: the weekly ritual of collecting our plastic, paper and glass and walking them to the kerb.

Australians are world leaders in curb-side recycling, confident we are contributing to a system that works.

CASTOR MURILLO, FMR COOLAROO RESIDENT AND PLAINTIFF: There is a big need for it. We can't just have everything just being dumped in the tips.

GEOFF THOMPSON: But neither is most of it being recycled in Australia. Instead, it is sent overseas. For the last decade, about half of Australia's waste, paper and plastic has been sold to China, where it is recycled into new products.

But not anymore.

TONY KHOURY, WASTE CONTRACTORS AND RECYCLERS ASSN. OF NSW: The Chinese have really banned the importation of material from all around the world. Approximately half of the world's recyclables were going to China. So the supply from the Australian market and from other markets continues, but the demand has disappeared by 50 per cent

PETE SHMIGEL, AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL OF RECYCLING: We are in a crisis and it requires serious action to get out of that crisis.

GEOFF THOMPSON: Recycling is a commercial transaction which only works if someone wants to pay for our recyclable commodities. China's ban has seen the price of recyclables plummet.

The value of recyclable paper and plastic has dropped by up to 80 per cent. Simply put: recycling in Australia is becoming an unprofitable business. Additional transport costs mean that regional areas, like Dubbo, are even worse affected by the China ban.

(Footage of dump truck depositing rubbish in tip)

BEN SHIELDS, MAYOR, DUBBO REGIONAL COUNCIL: It's already worth a lot less than what city recycling product is. So therefore, going to China is already worth a lot less.

If you are a council that's coming up to renewing a contract: guaranteed, the contractors are going to have to turn around and say, "Well, I am not making any money out of China anymore. They are not buying the product." So they are going to have to put prices up, which in turn will be passed onto ratepayers.

GEOFF THOMPSON: Rate increases to pay for recycling could cost Australian households up to \$40 more a year. But rate increases alone will not solve problem of where our recyclables go.

BEN SHIELDS: It could be argued: what is the point in a recycling regime in Australia, full stop, if the recycling only ends up in a place like this anyway? What is the point of that?

So we could be effectively charging for recycled product to be collected by the private companies. And then those private companies have no option, other than to dump it in a tip anyway: so in landfill. So it's going to be - it's a disaster on two fronts.

TONY KHOURY: We may see some recyclable material end up in landfill. Now, it hurts me to say that, but that is the likely scenario. That is what industry experts are telling me: that we are likely to see recyclable material end up in landfill in the next two or three months.

GEOFF THOMPSON: State governments have committed millions of dollars in emergency money to keep kerbside recycling alive: \$47 million in New South Wales and \$13 million in Victoria.

Most of the money is likely to go to local councils, so they can keep paying contractors to empty our bins. But what they are collecting is increasingly being stockpiled in recycling centres and warehouses.

PETE SHMIGEL: Let's at least store them for a time until we can get the contracts right, until we can create some domestic demand: and then utilise these stockpiles in a way that continues to maintain jobs and continues to provide the environmental benefit.

The last thing anybody would want is for that material to end up in landfill.

PETER ANDERSON, VICTORIAN WASTE MANAGEMENT ASSN.: Stockpiling is a short-term solution to an issue that we are not dealing with correctly. It's just giving us time to try and work it out. We are looking for the governments to help us work this out as quickly as we can.

(Aerial footage of fire at SKM Industries, Coolaroo, July 2017)

GEOFF THOMPSON: But stockpiles can be dangerous, as Australia witnessed last July when a recycling centre at Coolaroo in Victoria burned for 11 days.

Castor Murillo and his family were living close by.

CASTOR MURILLO: My eyes were burning. I was disorientated, light-headed. It hurt to breathe and I felt like throwing up. I wasn't sure what was happening.

GEOFF THOMPSON: Castor Murillo is the lead plaintiff in a class action against the recycling centre's operators and has moved far away.

CASTOR MURILLO: This has happened before at this recycling plant and people talk, but no action was taken.

So the only thing left for me to do is get my family out of there. So here we are: beautiful Gold Coast, clean air, no recycling plants around here. (Laughs)

(Footage of large hill of sand recycled from glass)

SEAN MCCORMICK, ALEX FRASER GROUP: There is absolutely no need for there to be any stockpiles of glass waste within Australia, when companies such as ourselves have developed processes that can turn a waste into a product that can be used throughout Australia.

So this is the finished product: it is a recycled road-base sand. It can be used widely within the civil construction industry, whether it be in asphalt, road-base products or pipe bedding.

GEOFF THOMPSON: A company in Victoria is already offering one solution to Australia's recycling crisis by repurposing stockpiles of unwanted glass, turning them into a sand that can be used in construction. It wants more government support.

SEAN MCCORMICK: The governments absolutely need to take the lead. So without their support and endorsement through specification and ensuring that they buy it and reuse it in their projects, you won't get the traction that is required for this particular product.

PETE SHMIGEL: We have got Snowy Hydro 2.0, coming up with 27 kilometres' worth of tunnelling in it - and all the roads that go with that. The Federal Government has an opportunity right there, together with other procurement projects, to say: "Look, we want recycled content - be it glass, be it mixed plastic, be it other materials - in the specifications to build these things."

GEOFF THOMPSON: Industry believers believe the time has come for Australia to rethink its entire recycling system.

KATE DRYDEN, VEOLIA AUSTRALIA: What I would really like to see is a circular economy here in Australia, like what we see in Europe. And that is about just stimulating the market for the products; looking at waste not as just something that we - you know, we use something and then we throw it in the bin. It is actually: how can we be reusing these waste streams in various activities?

PETE SHMIGEL: We are going to have to get smarter about building a new industry. The Chinese have acted to build their industry. Our opportunity is to act to build our own industry now.

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