

14th June 2023

Waste and Circular Economy Roundtable with Minister Penny Sharpe

Who defines the Circular Economy?

Definitions matter so let's not allow the true intention of the Circular Economy (CE) to be hijacked by those seeking to reframe their polluting waste technologies such as 'waste to energy incineration' or 'advanced chemical recycling' as part of the CE.

The CE needs to be a genuine re-evolution in the way we produce and consume, not more of the take, make, waste approach disguised as fake circularity.

You can't have a Circular Economy policy which supports waste incineration technologies that entrench waste disposal and the loss of finite resources. You can't be transitioning to net zero emissions while funding and approving waste incineration technologies that perpetuate the extraction and use of fossil fuel plastics.

We support the definition of a CE that enshrines and upholds a Zero Waste policy as its central pillar. A true CE is based on restorative and regenerative systems powered by genuine renewable energy sources to design out waste and pollution and keep materials and products in use for as long as possible .

As such, the CE policy must cap plastic production and eliminate toxic and hazardous substances to prevent the '*plasticisation*' of our materials production systems and the '*poisoning*' of the CE. For instance, new research has found that some recycled plastic food containers contain more toxic chemicals than virgin plastic.¹

For more information on the contamination of recycled plastic products see - <https://stoppoisonplastic.org/>

Zero Waste Policy is the backbone of the Circular Economy.

Zero Waste is not a lifestyle choice as is commonly promoted in Australia. Rather Zero Waste Policy is about critical system change to provide the resources needed for a CE. From raw materials extraction for precious metals and minerals needed for the renewable energy sector, to the final disposal of product and packaging design failures in the residual waste stream, Zero Waste Policy establishes the essential systems to capture and preserve the finite resources needed for a CE.

Zero Waste Policy requires governments to act and legislate. Zero Waste city models² operate throughout Europe and many comparable OECD countries. Australia has long been lagging behind these countries with the unenviable status of having the largest waste generation (and plastic consumption) per capita globally.

Australia must instead invest in better models of waste management specifically waste collection and source separation. Huge volumes of residual waste are being generated simply because there is no system for the separate collection of compostable, recyclable, and reusable materials. Greater investment is needed in reusable and refillable product and packaging systems. The federal government is to be congratulated for taking positive steps in this direction

¹ Hazardous chemicals in recycled and reusable plastic food packaging, DOI. 10.1017/plc.2023.7

² <https://zerowastecities.eu/>

recently, but Australia's decades of waste management failure has left our government playing catch up, rather than leading as an OECD country and as a High Ambition Coalition member of the UN's global plastic treaty.

“Advanced” and “Chemical” Recycling technologies are not the answer for Australia's plastic waste pollution crisis.

Pyrolysis and Gasification technologies are being heavily promoted and supported by state governments (especially Victoria) in Australia right now as a solution to the global plastic waste crisis. Yet these technologies – classified as incineration technologies in both the EU and US – are not operating successfully anywhere in the world.

NSW has an opportunity to lead the way on Zero Waste and CE policy. However, this will not be possible if NSW policy and regulations continue to enshrine waste incineration technologies which were rushed through without civic engagement or independent expert assessment by the previous NSW government. Regional communities in NSW now face the very real prospect of environmental justice threats, polluted land, air and water and the loss of tourism, agricultural and other businesses that they have relied upon and delivered, for the benefit of all in NSW. Indigenous communities and traditional owners face the prospect of contaminated waterways, land, and the loss of their cultural heritage from highly toxic incinerator pollution.

There is no time to get this wrong. The systems put in place today will decide our future. The NSW government can commit to a true CE and Zero Waste future, or it can entrench another business-as-usual approach for the fossil fuel industry by backing dangerous incineration technologies including pyrolysis and gasification.

“Pyrolysis technologies are thermodynamically unproven, practically implausible, and environmentally unsound”, according to independent experts.³ Refuse or plastic derived fuels extracted from dirty waste streams will deliver dirty outcomes, more pollution and hazardous waste generation.⁴

We acknowledge the Federal Labor government's commitment to exclude funding for waste incineration under the Clean Energy Finance Corporation (CEFC) and Australian Renewable Energy Agency (ARENA) recognising that this industry is not a clean nor renewable energy industry. However, in a stealthy sideways step, significant amounts of government funding are being directed towards projects that claim to be “recycling infrastructure” but are in fact waste incineration projects rebranded as “advanced chemical recycling” and refuse derived fuel production projects. This is not the pathway to a CE. While vast amounts of public funds are being given to industrial projects at the disposal end of our waste systems, there is little to no investment or legislative support for critical upstream waste management. Again, we need a cap on plastic production (turn off the tap), elimination of toxic substances in our materials production systems (cleaning out the cupboard) and Zero Waste Policy (mopping up the mess).

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³ Andrew Neil Rollinson*, Jumoke Mojisola Oladejob, *‘Patented blunderings’, efficiency awareness, and self-sustainability claims in the pyrolysis energy from waste sector*, 2019.

⁴ A Technology Risk Analysis, GAIA, *Waste Gasification & Pyrolysis: High Risk, Low Yield Processes for Waste Management no-burn.org/gasification-pyrolysis-risk-analysis*, March 2017.