

Submission: Implementing a lightweight single-use plastic bag ban in Western Australia



15 February 2018

The Shire of Augusta Margaret River welcomes the opportunity to comment on the proposed lightweight single-use plastic bag ban for Western Australia.

In addition to the Shire's support for the WALGA submission, the Shire would like to formally support the ban on lightweight single-use plastic bags and offer recommendations to strengthen the impact the ban has on the environment and litter reduction.

The title of the Discussion Paper, 'Implementing a lightweight single-use plastic bag ban in Western Australia' infers that somehow 'lightweight' bags are problematic but heavier weight plastic bags are acceptable. It has been scientifically proven that this is not the case, it is known that all plastics have the potential to have a detrimental impact on the environment if not disposed of responsibly and even then, they have a long term adverse impact on landfill where they remain intact for extensively long periods. It is therefore the Shire's position, that all single-use plastic bags should be banned.

Shire of Augusta Margaret River Recommendations:

1. Expand the ban to include biodegradable, degradable and compostable bags

The Shire does not currently have a facility to process compostable and biodegradable bags so they are likely to end up in landfill or as a contaminant in the recycling stream, if not as litter. Degradable bags are designed to break down into microplastics, which are another source of plastic pollution. Continued distribution of these bags will likely result in the same effect as lightweight plastic bags when released into the environment or digested by animals. The Shire does not consider that it is appropriate to substitute lightweight plastic bags with biodegradable, degradable and compostable bags. The ban should promote waste avoidance and reduction, as opposed to product substitution.

2. Include plastic >35 microns in the ban or as a minimum impose a charge of at least \$1 per bag.

Continuing to allow bags >35 microns to be distributed by retailers will only replace the lightweight plastic bags with a heavier plastic that is harder to breakdown and may actually increase the amount of plastic that ends up as litter or in the waste stream. The impact on the environment may be even more significant than is currently experienced. It is unlikely that people will reuse these bags if they are not making the effort to bring their own bags in the first place. Simply permitting the use of heavier micron bags will not achieve any behaviour change in the community. If supply of these thicker bags continues to be permitted, charging for their distribution should be mandatory, however, it is emphasized that it is not a preferred option. A suggested fee of at least \$1 may be a deterrent to ensure it becomes financially unviable for people to use single-use plastic bags, however, it is recognised that it may be difficult to impose this on businesses. It is therefore the most appropriate and sound option, to ban all single use plastic bags.

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3. **All single-use bags should be included in the ban including those without handles. Paper bags should be permitted only if they are made from recycled materials.**

Continuing to allow other types of plastic bags will deter from one of the major goals of the project which is to reduce plastic litter in the environment, which requires a shift in behaviour. Expanding the scope of the ban to include all single-use bags (dog waste bags, barrier bags, bin bags and non-recycled paper bags) will eliminate these items from contaminating the environment and send a sound message to the public regarding the adverse impact of single-use plastic bags.

4. Ban all single-use plastic items

The Shire is in support of a ban on all single use plastics and encourages the State Government to raise awareness about the effects of single-use plastic on the environment by educating the community about how their use of these everyday items of convenience is causing harm to marine animals and wildlife. Single-use plastic items are a major contributor to plastic litter and marine pollution.

5. Impact on Shire's proposed Resource Recovery Facility

The Shire is currently undertaking a Feasibility Study for the construction of a Resource Recovery Facility that will have the potential to process and recycle some 70% of the waste generated within the region. One of the major considerations is the contamination of waste streams with single-use plastic and the cost of removing this contamination. In the case of organics, markets demand a high quality product for re-use on a commercial scale. A ban on single-use plastic bags and single-use plastic items will assist in educating the community and ensuring that contamination of the Shire's future Resource Recovery Facility is minimal. This will ultimately result in some cost savings to the Shire, however, this is not quantifiable at this time.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the Shire of Augusta Margaret River supports the initiative to ban single-use plastic bags but for the reasons outlined above, believes that the ban must be broadened and strengthened if it is to have any meaningful effect.

The Shire of Augusta Margaret River would like to commend the Department of Water and Environment Regulation on taking the first steps to tackle single-use plastic bags. We believe that improvements can be made to the proposed policy and would trust that the regulators are assessing the shortcomings of the bag ban already implemented in other states of Australia.

This is an opportunity for Western Australia to lead by example, to take a strong stance against single-use plastic rather than follow reform that has proven to be flawed.