

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION OF THE
NORTHERN TERRITORY**



**SUBMISSION TO THE PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION
INQUIRY INTO WASTE GENERATION
AND RESOURCE EFFICIENCY**

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The Local Government Association of the Northern Territory welcomes the opportunity to make comment to the Productivity Commissions Inquiry into Waste Generation and Resource Efficiency. This submission contains comments and information that the Association believes is relevant to the inquiry.

The Local Government Association of the Northern Territory ('the Association') is recognised as the peak representative body for local government in the Northern Territory. The 63 local government bodies that are members of the Association include:

- 6 Municipalities,
- 30 Community Government Councils,
- 26 Incorporated Associations, and
- 1 Special Purpose Town.

The Associations membership includes 50 Indigenous Community Government Councils and Incorporated Associations. The Association has federated nationally with other State Local Government Associations to form the Australian Local Government Association. One of the Associations roles is to effectively advocate and represent member councils in issues that will effect local government.

Waste management is an important local government service in the Northern Territory. The majority of the Associations members are small remote communities, which struggle to find the resources and skills to manage their responsibilities. The management of waste has become more regulated and this increasing regulation can have major impacts on council budgets and other services. It is important that small remote communities be consulted when developing targets and supported in achieving them.

While this submission has been prepared using comments and information provided by members, it does not reflect the view of all members.

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WASTE MANAGEMENT DATA AND INFORMATION

The ability of local government to collect waste information is subject to other factors, such as:

- resources,
- remoteness,
- skill levels of staff, and in many cases
- an external service provider's cooperation.

It is difficult for waste managers in the Northern Territory to gather meaningful data on waste, due to the limited resources available to councils to conduct audits. Many councils operate remote un-staffed facilities in which waste disposal is unsupervised. In addition to this, many users of waste management facilities are not within local government areas and would not be included in any ratepayer or council area resident survey (e.g. pastoral property owners, tour groups). The collection of waste management data may also require the assistance of private waste contractors who operate services for councils. Demanding data and information from private companies can be an additional cost for councils if it is not in the existing contract.

When setting targets or determining best practice it is important that local information is gathered and used. The perceptions and understanding of waste management, its impacts, and waste reduction strategies would vary greatly between residents of a large coastal city (where the majority of Australians live) and, for example, a remote Indigenous community. These differences in perception and understanding could have a significant impact on a waste programmes success or failure and so is a very important consideration. Un-researched assumptions on the willingness or ability of people to understand and participate in programmes will often result in poor results, once the programme is implemented on the ground, and an alienation of communities from government.

TRAINING AND EDUCATION

Education of all members of the community is a vital part of waste management. A recent survey of one major Northern Territory town showed that while 41% of residents knew the government had a waste to landfill reduction target, only 3% knew what it was.

Education includes ensuring people know how to reduce the amount of waste they produce, ideas for reusing waste items, and what materials they can recycle. Education programmes must be locally adapted. Many communication methods used by government agencies are not suited to all the communities they target. For example, communications aimed at Indigenous communities should be locally adapted to be understood properly and supported. There are a wide variety of agencies and groups, such as the Local Government Association, which have experience in tailoring programmes to specific clients which could provide valuable assistance in this area.

The opportunity for waste management staff to undertake waste management training can be extremely limited. This is particularly so for remote communities which may be a long way from training providers and also for Indigenous communities where there may be special training needs or cultural considerations. The funds and time needed to undertake such training are often impossible for poorly resourced councils to meet alone. This means that the staff most desperately in need of the training can not get to it or afford it. In many instances, it only requires a small amount of training for staff to grasp the concepts and practices being promoted and their understanding and cooperation can have very positive results on work practices and community. Peak representative bodies, such as the Local Government Association, are well positioned to be able to adapt and deliver training to communities on behalf of state/territory governments and the Australian Government, if properly resourced and supported.

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WASTE MANAGEMENT TARGETS

The setting of waste management targets is an important tool in improving the way waste managers and waste facilities operate. Targets which have been promoted in the past have undoubtedly set the minimum standard of management for which waste managers can aspire and have reduced or eliminated many dangerous practices. However waste management targets, which are set without thorough consultation with local government and communities by State/Territory government and/or the Australian Government, do not take into account conditions and resources of remote small communities including remote Indigenous communities. These types of communities are often struggling to find the resources and skills to be able to perform their basic functions and unconsulted changes in waste targets and management practices can have significant impact on council resources or on their ability to be able to comply with new policies. The diverse range of climates, landforms, social composition, cultural beliefs, and economic viability of communities across Australia requires strategies and policies to be locally consulted and then adapted so they are realistic, achievable, and locally supported.

The waste management hierarchy is recognised by the Association as being the best practice hierarchy for waste management. It provides waste managers with a simple plan / path for effective and more sustainable waste management. It should not be applied in a mandatory order, as this will result in the inefficient use of limited resources, but instead used as a guide for selecting the option most suited to local needs and restraints.

The 'Best Practice' model of integrated waste management is often difficult to achieve for remote underdeveloped communities. In these types of communities' initiatives that are promoted or imposed by the State/Territory and Australian governments can be uneconomical and difficult to achieve. An example of the difficulties for small remote communities is recycling. Recycling is heavily promoted as a minimum effort for integrated waste management services. In remote communities, the cost of collecting and transporting materials to recycling service providers can be much more than any funds received by their return. This would mean the cost of providing a recycling service would need to be met by council taking funds from another service or with an environmental or waste levy being attached to goods. The majority of funding received by local government is allocated to a specific purpose and cannot be reallocated to new initiatives. It would also be difficult to impose a levy in remote communities as many of these communities are facing serious social and economic difficulties, which would be considered a higher priority than externally set waste management targets.

Another example where small remote communities differ from larger managed landfills is the burning of waste. The burning of waste is considered bad practice, due to the risks to human and environmental health posed by toxins in the smoke. In many remote communities the burning of waste still takes place regularly, as it solves many problems at once. If burning takes place when wind conditions blow smoke away from populated areas the risk to health is seen by many managers as minimal. After burning, the amount of waste going to landfill is greatly reduced. Less waste mass going to landfill will result in a longer life for the landfill and so will reduce costs associated with selecting and building a new facility. The burning of waste also reduces the risks of putrescibles, causing bad odours or attracting animal and insect pests. This can reduce the risk of disease being spread. Burning also reduces the need for regular covering of waste, further reducing staff and equipment demands. The alternative is the daily / weekly covering and compaction of waste and the more frequent need for a new landfill site. These are demands that resource short councils struggle to meet. Remote area councils would need to be convinced that the benefits of government initiatives are greater than the savings of their current methods.

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When new national targets are set for waste management they can bring additional new costs to council when implemented. Strategies for raising funds to undertake the new management methods (which are needed to meet targets) should be included with information sent to councils or with new training. Any shortfall in meeting the costs of new management methods should be paid for by the government / department / agency setting the new targets. If shortfalls in funding are not covered remote councils will continue to only be able to provide basic waste management facilities, unlike high population areas which can provide their communities with new technologies and facilities. They will also continually fail to meet national or state/territory standards.

INDUSTRY AND PRODUCER RESPONSIBILITY

The commonly held perception that local government is solely responsible for waste management reduces the accountability of waste producers in managing their own waste and in adopting innovative technologies for waste management. State/Territory and the Australian governments are responsible for regulating industry practices including waste management policies and the setting of waste management targets. Voluntary codes of conduct leave it to industry to regulate their own waste management. If industry fails to meet voluntary targets then State/Territory governments may choose to set new targets to rectify the situation or pressure industry into voluntary compliance. It ultimately falls on local government as the primary waste managers to meet these targets and try to get local industry to comply. It is important that local government is supported in this area.

The Association supports the principle that those who create waste should take full responsibility for that waste. In the case of industry, the Association supports the imposition of legislation, regulations and incentive schemes which will compel the industry to:

- introduce policies which will enable sectors of industry to reach mandatory waste reduction targets within a specified timeframe
- accept 'cradle to the grave' responsibility for the products, waste and litter it produces, at both the production and post consumer stages
- adopt 'closed loop' processes for the products and packaging it creates
- reduce the unnecessary packaging of goods
- use at least a specified percentage of recycled material in their production processes
- use only packaging materials which are capable of being recycled and have a mark as recycled material

The Association strongly supports the introduction of Container Deposit Legislation (CDL) as a litter control mechanism. Container deposits have been introduced in some Northern Territory community stores as a local initiative. For example, one remote area store in central Australia has introduced its own container deposit system which consists of two major parts. The first is a ten cent refund for all PET plastic bottles returned to the store. This is open to all children and also elderly people who care for children. In this way litter is picked up and the proceeds go to members of the community seen as being in most need of support. The second method is offering children an ice block for every bag of aluminium cans handed in. The store provides the bags and exchanges an ice block for the full bag. These programmes have been successful in controlling some litter items. As this is a local initiative there is potential for recyclables to be brought in from neighbouring communities. If this were to become common the store may not be able to afford the cost of the programme, so to be successful the container deposit must be applied across the Northern Territory.

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In 2005, the Association conducted a survey of the waste collected in one day (one of 2 garbage collection days per week) by the council waste team in a remote Indigenous community. It was found that around 20% of the waste collected on the day would be suitable for a container deposit (aluminium cans, glass bottles, PET bottles, wet cardboard containers). If a deposit was claimable on these items, the council could potentially use the funds raised to hire a staff member to sort through the waste as it is disposed at the landfill. The sorter could separate containers with deposits on them and also separate other recyclable materials such as steel cans, paper, cardboard, tyres, car batteries etc. In this way, a container deposit could assist funding wider recycling programmes.

LEGISLATION AND REGULATION

The Association believes that the Northern Territory, State and Federal governments should introduce regulatory and economic instruments to reduce litter and reduce the amount of waste going to landfill disposal. Instruments which should be considered include:

- differing taxing or tariffs on virgin material and recycled material
- container Deposit Legislation
- a motor vehicle tyre deposit system
- the use of products with the maximum recycled component
- levies or other price support mechanisms on materials and/or products which are not currently recycled for either economic or practical reasons
- legislation or controls which ban or restrict the quantities or use of materials on the basis of their excessive contribution to the waste stream, non – biodegradability and non – recyclable

Landfills and other waste facilities should be publicly owned so as to ensure that waste disposal and management complements an overall waste minimisation strategy and to ensure public health and environmental quality are not compromised. These facilities should, where possible, maximise their efforts to separate and divert materials for reuse and recycling.

The Association supports the establishment of a single coordinating body for each State/Territory to control and direct the disposal of solid waste. Such a body should:

- include substantial representation from Local Government as well as representatives of the Environmental Protection Agency, industry, and special interest/community groups
- develop broad waste policies for their jurisdiction for implementation at a regional level. Policies must be flexible enough to allow for local differences and locally consulted.
- develop licence conditions for landfills and other waste disposal facilities
- set industry reduction targets and properly resource compliance monitoring
- assist with the development and implementation of waste education programmes
- monitor the effectiveness of waste management policies and programmes and seek regular feedback from Local Government.

Local government must be supported in the management of waste if best practice methods are to be implemented in all parts of Australia. The setting of unrealistic and unconsulted national targets will only result in local failure and frustration and could discourage new alternative technologies being devised. Cooperation between waste producers, local government, and peak representative bodies offers planners and managers accessible and experienced partners for the development of more efficient and effective methods to manage the waste we all produce.