

PLASTIC SHOPPING BAGS (WASTE AVOIDANCE) BILL 2010

Introduction and First Reading

Bill introduced, on motion by **Hon Sally Talbot**, and read a first time.

Second Reading

HON SALLY TALBOT (South West) [10.19 am]: I move —

That the bill be now read a second time.

Australians use nearly four billion plastic bags each year. About three per cent are recycled. The rest end up in either our environment or landfill. When the Environment Protection and Heritage Council met in Perth last October, expectations were high that it would reach an agreement on imposing a national ban on plastic bags. Sadly, those high expectations were not met and the EPHC failed to reach agreement on a national move. It is in the face of that failure that I am introducing this bill.

The bill contains nine clauses. As well as definitions of the key terms and phrases, the clauses cover provisions for a transition period and details of offences, defences and penalties ranging from \$5 000 to \$20 000 in relation to the provision of plastic bags. It is worth noting that the highest penalty of \$20 000 pertains to the offence of knowingly providing a plastic bag that does not conform to environmentally acceptable standards. Clause 8 gives a detailed account of the regulations pertaining to the act. The bill also contains provisions for a ministerial review after two years.

The link between the use of plastic bags and environmental damage is internationally recognised. Those who are familiar with the literature on this subject will know that many countries around the world, including Ireland, Malta, Taiwan and South Africa, have introduced plastic bag taxes or prohibited the supply of free bags. Bangladesh and China have banned, or are about to ban, lightweight bags completely, and several other countries, including Scotland, England and Spain, have bans and restrictions under active consideration.

If the Western Australian Parliament passes this legislation, we will not be alone amongst Australian states. South Australia and Victoria have both banned plastic bags. As well, several WA councils and communities, including Albany and Fremantle, have made moves to eliminate plastic bag use. The Bag Smart website, which can be found at www.bagsmart.com.au, lists the following areas as having activists working on ridding the environment of plastic bags: Boddington, Bremer Bay, Bridgetown, Coolgardie, Denmark, Dunsborough, Esperance, Exmouth, Goomalling, Hopetoun, Jerramungup, Jurien Bay, Kalgoorlie–Boulder, Kambalda, Kojonup, Manjimup, Margaret River, Moora, Nannup, Port Hedland, Quairading, Rottnest Island, the Town of Cambridge, Three Springs and York.

The following information about public support for restricting the use of plastic bags is taken from the commonwealth government's regulatory impact statement on the investigation of options to reduce the impacts of plastic bags, which is dated April 2008 —

A Newspoll survey commissioned by Clean Up Australia in April 2005 found that 81% of adult Australians favour a ban on single-use plastic bags. This sentiment is evident Australia-wide, with similar results among men and women across all age groups, and for white and blue collar workers. If shoppers use a plastic bag, 46% said it was because they were always given one by retailers, and 35% said they had been unable to buy an alternative at the time the plastic bag was needed. Another 2005 Newspoll survey showed that 69% of South Australians now shop with a reusable bag and 87% say no to a plastic bag ... A survey undertaken by Planet Ark in 2003 identified that eight out of ten Australians supported a levy on plastic bags. While these surveys asked differing questions, the common thread is that they indicate strong community support for action to reduce plastic bag use.

Community concern about plastic bags centres partly on the number of plastic bags going to landfill—remembering that 97 per cent of the four billion plastic bags used across Australia every year are not recycled. The fact is that plastic bags take up to 1 000 years to break down.

When I first began discussing this bill at the end of last year, several people contacted me to say that if people have ever tried to store something in a plastic bag for an extended period of time, they soon discover that plastic bags do degrade. The point, however, is that ordinary plastic carry bags actually break down into thousands of minute plastic discs. They might degrade, but they are very far from biodegradable, and are as damaging to the environment in their degraded form as they are in their original form.

The community is equally concerned about the impact of plastic bags in public places, in parks, on beaches and in rural and remote areas. The effect on wildlife caught up in plastic bag debris is not easily estimated but

anecdotally is significant, and suggests that the use of the precautionary principle is readily justifiable. The effect on recreational equipment such as boat engines, diving gear and jet intakes is well documented and substantial.

In the past, manufacturers and retailers have tended to blame the plastic bag-using public for the damage caused by bag litter. In recent times, however, an increasing number of them are recognising that public opinion is leading the way on this issue, and they are acting to reduce plastic bag availability. As most honourable members will know, the Wesfarmers group has already withdrawn plastic bags from Bunnings and Officeworks, and has announced a phase-out from its Target stores.

All this is evidence of a most interesting phenomenon in the area of recycling and resource recovery. The new lexicon that is shaping our community's approach to waste and how we deal with it is peppered with terms like "reduce", "reuse", "recycle" and "recover". As Hon Kate Doust observed the other day in this place, these four words have replaced the three Rs that many of us grew up with. The fact is that the public and industry are ahead of their parliamentarians in many respects when it comes to implementing programs to give practical effect to the objectives of reducing, reusing, recycling and recovering. To get a flavour of the commitment that the community and industry stakeholders are willing to demonstrate in turning theory into practice when it comes to transforming our attitude to waste management, we need go no further than many of the submissions about the draft waste strategy, all of which are available on the Waste Authority's website.

A couple of the arguments put forward for not imposing a ban are worth mentioning here. The first involves convenience, practicality and the health benefits of wrapping food hygienically. I am satisfied that these concerns have been addressed effectively by this bill, which specifies precisely the type of bag to be banned. I urge honourable members to study the definitions contained in the bill to assuage any concerns brought to them by their constituents about the use of small plastic bags to wrap things such as food scraps and dog poo.

The second concern relates to the urgent need to tackle other plastic waste that is contaminating our environment, particularly plastic water bottles. The critical difference, of course, is that plastic water bottles can be recycled, whereas plastic bags remain a contaminant even when they are placed in recycling bins.

The truth is that we have to start somewhere, and this bill for an act to restrict the supply of single-use shopping bags is a great place to begin. I commend the bill to the house.

Debate adjourned, pursuant to standing orders.