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Australian Retailers Association Code of Practice for the Management of Plastic Bags Final Report December 2005

This report is provided to the Environment Protection and Heritage Council (EPHC) and its contents may be used publicly.

This final report describes the progress of Group II retailers in implementing the Australian Retailers Association Code of Practice for the Management of Plastic Bags (Code) for the period up to December 2005, and includes survey results as well as descriptions of activities.

Group I (Supermarket) retailers have reported their results under the Code separately.

Group II retailers:

- **A fax-back and email survey of 2558 Group II retailers was carried out; 2266 surveys were successfully sent with a 7.02% response rate.**
- **Over 85% of respondents were aware of the EPHC initiative to reduce lightweight plastic carry bags.**
- **19% of retailers indicated they were already signatories of the Code. Of the remaining 81%, more than 59% indicated that they would be prepared to become a signatory.**
- **More than 90% of Group II retailers surveyed indicated they had already reduced the use of lightweight plastic carry bags in their business with 59% of respondents having reduced their usage by more than 50% since 2003. 24% claim to have completely removed plastic bag usage from their businesses.**

Background

The lightweight HDPE plastic carry bag (with built in handles), traditionally used by the majority of retailers in Australia, has attracted a high degree of attention as an environmental concern over the past 3 years. This concern has been primarily around its persistence and damage as marine and terrestrial litter, but also as a resource-intensity concern.

The Australian Retailers Association adopted a Code of Practice for a managed reduction and recycling of current lightweight HDPE plastic carry bags in October 2003. The code covers HDPE single use lightweight plastic bags designed for the general carriage of foods by consumers, commonly referred to as "*singlet bags*" (and does not include non-handled cross-contamination/barrier bags).

The Code addresses the Environment Protection and Heritage Council's challenge to retailers to reduce and recycle current lightweight HDPE plastic carry bags and represents a significant commitment by retailers to a range of initiatives to meet Environment Ministers' concerns about the environmental impacts of such bags.

The initiative commits retailer signatories to work with governments, other industries and the broader community to influence behavioural change and substantially reduce the volume of plastic bags in the litter stream.

Last years results show that Group I retailers achieved a 33.8% reduction in the annualised rate of HDPE plastic carry bags. It was also found that they issued or sold in excess of 9.9 million "Green" re-usable bags and more than 1 million other alternative reusable carry bags (since 2003). Overall, they appear to be on target and are contributing towards changing consumer behaviour towards plastic bags.

Code Signatories

The Australian Retailers Association continues to encourage a wide range of bag-issuing businesses to sign to the Code.

Group II signatories

As defined in the Code, Group II signatories are retailers who issue lightweight HDPE plastic carry bags, who are not in the Group I category – they are characterised as predominantly small to medium sized retail organisations.

For this report and the survey, specific retail categories involving Group II members included: Tobacconist; Duty Free; Electrical; Fabrics; Fast Food; Book Shops; Liquor Stores; Footwear; Fresh Food; Giftware and Kitchenware; Handbags and Leather Goods; Hairdressing; Hardware; Health Food; Bread Shops; Lighting; Manchester; Newsagents; Nurseries; Perfume and Cosmetics; Cake Shops; Pet Shops; Pharmacies; Video Shops; Card Shops; Stationery; and Toys Stores.

Group II Retailers Survey Results

- A fax-back survey of 2558 Group II retailers was designed, and distributed, to gain an understanding of awareness, comprehension, commitment and current activity concerning the reduction of usage of HDPE plastic carry bags, producing overall positive and encouraging results.
- 2266 questionnaires were successfully electronically distributed by facsimile to members and via email in the selected retail sectors. The fax distribution process was carried out over 3 days from Tuesday 21 March to Thursday 23 of March 2006. 159 responses were received which is an overall survey response rate of 7.02% (which is significant in direct marketing terms).
- Feedback was anonymous, however approximately 96% of retailers did provide their business details with their returned questionnaire; approximately 65% of these respondents provided written feedback.
- Over 85% respondents were aware of the EPHC initiative to reduce lightweight plastic carry bags.

- 19% of retailers surveyed indicated they were already signatories of the Code of Practice for the managed reduction and recycling of lightweight plastic carry bags. Of the remaining 81%, more than 59% indicated a preparedness to become a signatory.
- Of most significance, more than 93% of Group II retailers surveyed indicated that they have already reduced the use of lightweight plastic carry bags in their business. 59.6% of respondents have reduced their usage by more than 50% since 2003; approximately 6.71% have made no attempt to reduce plastic bag usage; and 24.8% claim to have completely removed plastic bag usage from their businesses.
- Summary of survey data and analysis/responses is detailed below. Overall there has been a further improvement from the interim June 2005 report, however the data is difficult to longitudinally compare in terms of retailers who are re-reporting and reporting for the first time.

Question One

Are you aware of the Environment Protection and Heritage Council's (EPHC) initiative to reduce the use of lightweight plastic carry bags?

Yes	No	Actual
87.66%	12.34%	154

Question Two

Are you a signatory of the Code of Practice for the managed reduction and recycling of lightweight plastic carry bags?

Yes	No	Actual
19.21%	80.79%	151

Question Three

Would you become a signatory to the Code of Practice for the managed reduction and recycling of lightweight plastic carry bags?

Yes	No	Actual
52.90%	48.15%	138

Question Four

- Have you reduced the use of lightweight plastic carry bags in your business?
- Please indicate, as a percentage, your estimated reduction in use of lightweight plastic bags since 1 January 2005.

Yes	No	Actual
92.31%	7.69%	156

On a sliding scale, estimated reduction in use of lightweight plastic bags varied from 0 to 100 percent. 149

Up to and including	0%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%	60%	70%	80%	90%	100%
	6.71	7.38	8.05	10.07	5.37	14.09	2.68	4.03	3.36	4.70	33.55

Group II Retailers Comments

The survey responses on the whole were very positive. Through the survey, respondents provided comments. These comments were varied but also included an indication of alternatives to plastic bags that have been adopted.

Over 27% of respondents reported that they were now using paper bags, 12.5% reported they use cardboard boxes, 24% reported they were using another alternative which included woven reusable bags, recycled, calico and cloth bags. The comments section also outlined the collaboration between retailers, with some respondents reporting that they source unwanted cardboard boxes from local businesses such as service stations and cafes for further use. Other comments outlined activities such as providing free give-aways, charging for plastic bags, recycling plastic bags and training staff to ask whether a bag is required. A continued concern of Group II respondents was raised in relation to the affordability and lack of storage space for alternatives.

Public Education Campaigns and Initiatives

'Say NO to Plastic Bags' - Behavioral Change Campaign

During 2004 and again in 2005 Clean Up Australia has spearheaded a community behavioural change campaign in support of the Code's initiatives. The campaign encourages both shoppers and retailers to say NO to plastic bags, to use reusable bags and to recycle old plastic bags. Campaign funding is primarily provided by Group I signatories.

Continuing under the 'Say NO to Plastic Bags' banner in 2005, the campaign repeated and reminded shoppers to say NO to plastic bags and also extended to more actively target

non-supermarket retailers. Retailers such as takeaway and convenience stores, pharmacies, newsagents and hardware stores now issue half of all plastic bags.

Television, radio and outdoor advertising formed part of the campaign, as did radio and Shop-a-Docket competitions and promotions, public relations targeting both shoppers and non-supermarket retailers, promotion through Stockland Shopping Centres, direct marketing, work with local councils, a plastic bag litter audit and a campaign website.

Shopper activities

In 2005 shoppers were also reminded to take their reusable bags with them and to use these bags in every shop, not just the supermarket. There is a stronger call to action for grocery buyers aged 25 to 34 years as well as continued targeting of grocery buyers 40 years and over.

To further reinforce the message with shoppers, Clean Up Australia has investigated a number of different options for reminding people to take their reusable bags with them when shopping. A 'reminder pack' featuring a shopping list pad, fridge magnet, keyring and door hanger has been developed. Some of the major retailers are individually looking at distributing part of the reminder pack in 2006.

Group II responses regarding shopper activities were varied with some retailers finding customers refuse bags, bring their own or prefer paper, while other retailers expressed the lack of willingness for consumers to use alternatives. Some retailers also expressed concern about the short life of free give-aways and the need for increased consumer awareness. These concerns outline the need for further consumer awareness programs to be conducted through Group II retailers.

Retailer activities

The Australian Retailers Association is working closely with Clean Up Australia and retailers to raise community awareness to reduce lightweight plastic carry bag usage, increase the use of alternative bags and to find a viable solution for the domestic use of bin liners and dog litter bags.

Clean Up Australia also worked with several companies in the service station and pharmacy sectors on tailored campaigns that were rolled out to shoppers in 2005.

To generate further action from other retailers and to drive reductions in the use of lightweight plastic carry bags in these sectors, a tailored education and communications campaign was developed by Clean Up Australia, the Australian Retailers Association and the Federal Government.

This Plastic Bag Reduction Toolkit has been designed to give small retailers the practical assistance they need to reduce plastic bag use. The Toolkit also aims to generate awareness of a possible phase out, detail resources available to other retailers and profile some of the non-supermarket retailers who have already joined the 'Say NO to Plastic Bags' campaign and their successes.

Included in the kit are a web site, helpline and printed materials:

- **web site** – offering advice, materials and a step-by-step guide to reducing plastic bag use in each store as well as guidance on everything from how to choose the best alternative, to ways retailers can promote their actions to customers with real case studies. An important part of the website is access to information on alternative bag suppliers and bulk buying rates. (www.noplasticbags.org.au)
- **free materials** – including a 16-page users' guide, posters and stickers to help retailers and customers to say no to plastic bags
- **telephone advisory service** – a plastic bag helpdesk telephone service where trained staff can answer retailers' questions and supply printed materials on request (Tel: 1300 654 419)

An informative website and advisory service formed key parts of the campaign, providing non-supermarket retailers with easy access to information and materials. A direct mail pack is being distributed to retailers, outlining the possible phase out of lightweight plastic carry bags and directing retailers to the website and advisory service for further information and materials. This is supported by public relations activities, direct approaches to major retail chains and plastic bag wholesalers to encourage development of bulk purchasing rates for alternative bags.

Future Directions

The Australian Retailers Association will continue its drive to reduce the use of plastic bags. The Australian Retailers Association recognises the reduced resources available to Group II retailers in reducing plastic bags and providing alternatives. As such there will be

an increased focus on supporting these retailers. Future activities will involve the drafting of a new code that may outline activities such as targeting retailers of non-English speaking backgrounds, providing additional consumer awareness programs, conducting research into alternatives to plastic bags for domestic use, sourcing preferred suppliers of plastic bag alternatives for Australian Retail Association members and increasing plastic bag recycling spots for Group II retailers.