
These common plastic items can't be recycled, but everyone throws them in the wrong bin anyway



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Supermarkets are worsening Australia's waste problem by placing meat, produce and ready-made meals on black trays that cannot be recycled and go straight to landfill, waste experts say.

Ron Wainberg, of waste management consulting business MRA Consulting, is calling on governments to ban plastic packaging that contains carbon black, the common colourant or pigment included in plastic to make it black or to block light.



Supermarket meat on a non-recyclable black tray. SHUTTERSTOCK

“People diligently will put these things in their recycling bin, and they’re just going to go to landfill,” said Wainberg. “What is needed is for the government to show leadership and regulate that these things can’t be used, but they won’t do it.”

The federal government did not answer questions as to whether it would ban the trays. A spokesperson said it was working “with states and territories to phase out single-use plastics and transform Australia’s packaging regulations”.

“Australia’s transition to a circular economy is well under way,” the spokesperson said.

The government’s public consultation on changes in packaging regulation found people “strongly supported a national ban on a limited set of problematic packaging inputs”, including carbon black.



Tomatoes on non-recyclable black trays. ABODE STOCK

Australia continues to fall short of its national packaging targets, and a recent study by the Australian Marine Conservation Society and Boomerang Alliance found that at most stores [it cost more to buy loose produce than its equivalent wrapped in plastic](#).

Wainberg said there were two problems with the trays. Some are made of polystyrene, which either cannot be recycled or has extremely limited recycling opportunities. The second problem is black items can’t be identified and separated by the optical sorting systems used in waste recycling, so they end up as landfill. And it isn’t just black – in Australia, no opaque plastic can be recycled.

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“It’s a shame because it undermines the integrity of everything else we’re trying to recycle,” he said. “The progress is very slow, and the community is waiting. The longer it takes, the more you risk undermining the community’s trust in the system.”

Wainberg said the Australian Packaging Covenant Organisation, the industry body known as APCO, should be “grabbing this one by the horns and fixing it”.

But five years after APCO called for the products to be phased out, they remain on shelves. A spokesperson did not answer whether it expected the federal government to introduce a ban. Some jurisdictions – such as South Australia, Western Australia and the ACT – have banned expanded polystyrene (EPS) products.

In 2020, APCO identified rigid plastic packaging with carbon black and expanded polystyrene fresh produce trays as materials to be phased out. It currently advises brand owners, importers and packaging manufacturers to “take immediate steps to avoid their import, production and sale”.

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“Black is perceived as an attractive, high-end colour for packaging applications, however it has limited sorting and reprocessing potential,” it said. “Educate and work with brand marketing teams to encourage the shift in colour.”

Supermarket giants Woolworths and Coles have phased out black trays from their home-brand meat and produce but have not done so for externally supplied products.

“We’re always looking at ways to improve our packaging as part of our ongoing commitment to removing unnecessary and problematic plastic from our stores and online,” a Coles spokesperson said.

A Woolworths spokesperson said while packaging played a vital role in maintaining product freshness and quality, sustainable packaging was important to its customers.

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An Aldi spokesperson said the supermarket was “prioritising the reduction or replacement of difficult-to-recycle black plastic trays”.

Metcash, which supplies groceries to independent supermarkets, said it did not supply black trays nationally and offered “recyclable alternatives that do not increase spoilage and/or reduce shelf life”. US retailer Costco did not respond to a request for comment.

Jeff Angel, of environment group Boomerang Alliance, said environment, packaging and waste groups were pushing federal Environment Minister Murray Watt for national, mandatory regulation of packaging.

Under this year’s national packaging targets, Australia was supposed to recycle or compost 70 per cent of plastic packaging. But just 20 per cent of plastic packaging has been repurposed, according to the most recent data from APCO.

Similarly, the latest national waste report shows only 63 per cent of urban waste is recycled.

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