



TRANSCRIPT

The Hon Peter Garrett MP

Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts

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PLASTIC BAG PHASE OUT

NEWSREADER:

Plastic bags may soon be a thing of the past, with the government considering plans to ban them by the end of the year.

REPORTER:

Australia uses about four billion plastic bags a year, with most of them ending up as landfill. According to Fairfax Papers, Environment Minister, Peter Garrett, is considering plans to either impose a levy on each bag, or ban them altogether. The proposal has the backing of environmentalists, but not the major supermarkets. The Australian Retailers' Association believes the current system of voluntary compliance, should remain.

NEWSREADER:

And Peter Garrett, the Environment Minister, joins us now on the line. Mr Garrett, what's the government up to, are you looking at a ban or a levy?

PETER GARRETT:

G'day, Leigh. Look, what's happening is that I expect to meet with State Ministers who've been looking at this issue already, in April of this year, working cooperatively with them, and look at the different options that are there for us to speed up the phase out of plastic bags. We want to phase them out, so do the states, we think it's absolutely critical that we get cracking on it.

I'm personally not advocating a levy, by the way, it may be one of the options, but there are other things that we can consider as well. Once we've looked at those options, then I

want us to get going, because as your intro piece pointed out, there are some four billion of these plastic bags, floating around the place, getting into landfill, ending up affecting our wildlife, showing up on our beaches while we're on holidays, and I think most Australians would like to see them rid.

REPORTER:

So you're meeting in April, but you can't put a date, or a rough timeframe for the ban to take effect?

PETER GARRETT:

Well, we'd like to see phase out implemented by 2008, and I think that's absolutely critical for us, given that there's been a fair amount of discussion already, between the states. We've certainly had a system in place that's been voluntary up to now, Sharon, where you've got people coming into the supermarkets, and they have the opportunity to take up those canvas bags, but at the end of the day, when you have a look at it, you say four billion plastic bags, here we are ... you know, I remember that incredible story about a whale, I think it was beached somewhere in France, and it had 800 ks worth of plastic bags and rubbish inside it, when they opened it up.

And you find the same thing ... and I've travelled up the coast talking to people that are working in communities on the coast, looking after ... rescuing sea life and things of that kind, even people working on Coastcare, when they go for a stroll in the morning, and they just see too many plastic bags around the place, and I think there are absolutely prudent alternatives, we ought to look at them, we ought to look at those options, work closely with the states, and with business, but actually get on with the really necessary task of seeing these plastic bags out of our system.

NEWSREADER:

What would you replace them with? You say people are ready for forego them, they're over them, but we still are using up to four billion of them a year.

PETER GARRETT:

Yes, Leigh, look, it's a really good question, because we are still using a lot of them. Clearly there's much, much more opportunity for using the recycle material bags and containers that are a part of some peoples' lives, that are strongly advocated for use by community groups and others, and I think as well, it's going to be a case of us really looking at the way in which we actually go and get our shopping stuff and take it back.

I mean I've got a few of those recycle bags that sit in the back of my car, and you know, occasionally you do forget them when you go to the supermarket, but generally, I think like most Australians, I prefer to walk out of the supermarket with all the groceries and what have you, in a bag which I can use again and again and again.

And if you consider the numbers of bags, and the fact that other countries are doing it as well, they're phasing them out, they're saying look, we actually don't really need to keep on having billions of plastic bags, you know, exposing our wildlife, billions of plastic bags in the bush, billions of plastic bags on the beaches, let's work, let's use our imagination, let's develop good practices, and phase them out.

REPORTER:

OK, so once you've implemented the phase out, where to then? I mean you're talking about the plastic bags that cover

dry cleaning, you know, plastic that covers biscuits in packets, and so on, so where does it end?

PETER GARRETT: Look, Sharon, you're absolutely right, there's a huge range of issues to consider generally, in terms of our use of plastic, but I think, on this specific issue, States ministers right around the Commonwealth, and the government agree, that for these plastic bags, which we're seeing show up in different places, providing harm to the environment, providing harm to our wildlife, let's start with them, let's recognise that we can do it.

And you know, you've got towns around Australia that have already done the phase out, you know, they're communities that have said, hang on a minute, we actually don't think that we need to live with these plastic bags showing up everywhere, and I reckon the country can do it too.

NEWSREADER: We spoke to the Retailers' Association about this, and they say a levy in Ireland on plastic bags, between 2002 and 2005, actually saw an increase in usage by 45 per cent.

PETER GARRETT: Well, Leigh, I don't know those statistics exactly, I certainly do know that different countries have tried different approaches. We're going to look at the options.

As I said when I came on at the beginning of the program, I'm not standing up here and saying that it has to be a levy, in fact I'm not saying that all, I don't reckon we necessarily need an extra tax here, what we need is some political will, and some cooperation, between us and the states, and industry

and the retailers, who I think have been very cooperative up to now, to move this forward.

You know, the public do want to see a lot less plastic bags in Australia's environment, that's the bottom line, and if there are ways of doing it, and I think that there are, and if we can get agreement from the states, and I hope that we can, then I reckon we should get cracking.

REPORTER: We're not talking popular politics?

PETER GARRETT: No, look, it's been Labour policy for a number of years, Sharon, and the states are already committed to the phase out. I think everybody agrees that having four billion plastic bags floating around Australia's environment is not desirable.

REPORTER: Right, OK, Environment Minister, Peter Garrett, thanks so much for your time, we appreciate it this morning.

PETER GARRETT: Thank you.

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