



The Hon Tanya Plibersek MP
Minister for the Environment & Water

The Hon Mark Butler MP
Minister for Health and Aged Care
Deputy Leader of the House

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Dear Ministers

Re: Call for urgent government action on the safe disposal of vapes

Clean Up Australia (CUA) and the Waste Management and Resource Recovery Association of Australia (WMRR) write in relation to an urgent waste and safety issue across Australia - vapes. WMRR is the national peak body representing Australia's \$15.8 billion waste and resource recovery (WARR) industry. With more than 2,200 members from over 400 entities nationwide, we represent the breadth and depth of the sector, within business organisations, the three (3) tiers of government, universities, and NGOs. As one of Australia's most trusted environmental charities, Clean Up Australia (CUA) inspires and mobilises communities to improve and conserve the environment, eliminate litter, and end waste. Over the past three (3) decades, more than 21 million people have participated in Clean Up Australia activities and events. Increasingly, CUA volunteers are finding vapes.

Our organisations wholeheartedly applaud the Australian Government's strong commitment to addressing the harm caused by vaping and the inclusion in the 2023-24 Budget of \$737 million to fund measures to address this harm. However, there is an obvious area that is creating significant harm to the broader community, including often to those that do not even vape, that to date is not being addressed, that is the safe disposal of these items at end-of-life.

At present vapes and lithium ion (li-ion) batteries are not only littered in the environment but are also having significant and serious impact on WARR vehicles and infrastructure due to fires from their incorrect disposal. These items are hazardous and must not ever be placed in general waste trucks or bins. They need to be disposed of safely at purpose-built locations that are capable of receiving and then recycling these problematic materials.

Whilst we appreciate the extensive measures proposed by government under its framework to restrict and manage vapes, as well as stamp out the illegal black market in vapes, the reality is there are millions in circulation, and there is no safe pathway for their disposal. Our essential sector is currently experiencing fires at an unprecedented rate due to the prevalence of these items. This is a national safety issue that requires real and urgent government action.

Due to the nature of their design, vapes are simultaneously classified as e-waste because of their electronic components, and as hazardous waste due to the liquid nicotine residue. Consumers are often confused and dispose of them in general waste, where they pose a fire risk if crushed or damaged. There is difficulty quantifying the exact number of vape/ battery related fires in WARR facilities and trucks given data reporting standards. However anecdotally we know of some national companies experiencing almost two (2) incidents a week, and we know that we have had complete loss of facilities due to these. The cost and the danger to life posed by vapes and li-ions is completely unacceptable.

Under existing national WARR regulations, there is no consistent or safe pathway for disposal of vapes, and at present due to the battery being embedded, vapes are not included in the nationwide Battery Stewardship Scheme (B-cycle). Meaning they cannot currently be dropped off at battery recycling points, like supermarkets and retailers. There is also no proposal at present to include these in the National E-waste Scheme – *Wired for Change*, that was consulted on earlier this year.

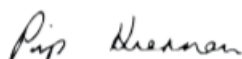
WMRR and CUA argue that given there is already a proposal to regulate vapes by the Federal Department of Health, there is an urgent need to act to regulate vape disposal, given data from a report released just this month by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) shows 52% of all burn injuries related to li-ion batteries between 2017 and 2022 came from vapes and e-cigarettes. Further, the report noted submissions from several of the state-based fire brigades all pointing to significant increases in the incidence of fires sparked by these li-ion batteries.

CUA and WMRR call on the Federal Government to urgently address this missing piece of the puzzle. We need to ensure that not only do we restrict vapes placed on market for health reasons but we manage them safely at end-of-life, also for health and safety reasons. We call on Government to introduce a producer responsibility scheme for vapes. This could be achieved quickly if these were included within the existing B-cycle scheme by expanding its scope to include vapes and requiring producers and importers to register with the scheme. Please note that this solution has been discussed with B-cycle and they are supportive of taking this approach with government assistance. This would result in the producers of vapes contributing financially to the existing scheme and this would also have the benefit of being the fastest viable pathway to get these hazardous items out of general waste streams.

CUA and WMRR call on the Federal Government to act quickly to respond to this challenge to close the loop on vapes. Manufacturers must take responsibility for the entire lifecycle of their products, including recycling and end-of-life disposal and to address what is a significant safety issue for both our workers and the community.

We would appreciate the opportunity to discuss this issue with you further. Please do not hesitate to contact the undersigned to discuss.

Yours sincerely



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