



Public Accounts and Estimates Committee
Parliament House, Spring St
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

Email: cso@parliament.vic.gov.au

2 April 2024

Dear Committee Secretary

Re: Inquiry into vaping and tobacco controls

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the Committee's inquiry into vaping and tobacco controls. The Waste Management and Resource Recovery Association of Australia (WMRR) is the national peak body representing Australia's \$17 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, including representation from business organisations, the three (3) tiers of government, universities, and Non-Government Organisations (NGOs), including research bodies.

WMRR appreciates that this inquiry focuses on the public health and harm impacts that vapes pose. However, as the peak national body for the WARR sector we would like to take this opportunity to draw the committee's attention to another very real harm that vapes are having, on the viability of our essential industry.

At present end-of-life vapes are not only having a serious impact on the environment through littering, but also due to their poor design (embedded battery) and lack of end of life management options in Australia, are also having a significant and serious impact on WARR workers, vehicles and infrastructure, due to their incorrect disposal and contributing directly to the increased incidence of fires. Vapes are in fact hazardous and must not ever be placed in general waste bins, rather they must be disposed of safely at purpose-built locations that can receive and these problematic materials. Regrettably, although vapes include a battery they are outside the scope of the existing battery stewardship scheme, operated by B-cycle in Australia given the fact that the battery is embedded, which results in no safe and consistent national disposal pathway.

Whilst WMRR appreciates the extensive measures proposed by the Federal 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. 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

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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 from the federal government to include these in the National E-waste Scheme – *Wired for Change*, that was consulted on last year.

WMRR has written to the Federal Government and argued that given there is already a proposal to regulate vapes by the Federal Department of Health, this should also include regulation of vape management at end-of-life, given data from a report released at the end of last year 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.

WMRR calls on all governments to act 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 are urging the Federal 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. 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 have also taken the opportunity to attach a paper that we prepared with B-cycle summarising what we believe could be the solutions to what is increasingly becoming a national emergency. Please contact the undersigned if you wish to further discuss WMRR's submission.

Yours sincerely

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Chief Executive Officer

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