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21st Jan 2022

Dear Territorians,

RE: Australia Needs a National Pandemic Waste Policy

Keep Australia Beautiful (KAB) is a national environmentally focused not for profit community-based organisation with over 50 years of experience and a network of teams within each State and Territory.

We are looking for Australian and State/Territory Government policy support to help prevent future pandemic health problem from turning into a national environmental problem.

Pandemic PPE is now our new type of litter and marine pollutant along with plastic bags, beverage containers, straws, plus takeaway cutlery, and containers.

It is noticeably clear that Australian Government COVID-19 policy responses does not include waste management policies. Our pandemic policies need measures that address sustainable waste management with producer responsibility and continuous improvements in pandemic waste management. Future policies should promote reusable items, recyclable items and limiting single-use items.

We at Keep Australia Beautiful would strongly recommend immediate actions and consideration to review, plan and implement National Pandemic Waste Management policies in preparation for the future. From our perspective at KABC(NT), it is extremely disappointing when national government expenditure on pandemic human health is nowhere near being proportionate to the expenditure required on environmental health during the pandemic.

As a national community-based organisation, we are also overly concerned that materials from pandemic goods and services (masks, wet wipes, gloves, and Rapid Antigen Test kits) are not recyclable within Australia and that there is no national focus or public education on reducing single use items associated with the pandemic.

Australian Government and Northern Territory Government mask wearing mandates, lockdowns and lockouts has resulted in the prevalence of mask and PPE usage and litter.

Most PPE and test equipment used currently have a high plastic material component content and are not recyclable nor reusable and are even a biohazard. We need to challenge, address, and change these issues.

Australia being a leader within the Oceania region, cannot continue to mismanage environmental impacts of COVID PPE and testing materials any longer.

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There is clearly a need for national pandemic funding support to immediately address and help review, plan, and educate our nation on pandemic sustainable goods and services, responsible green procurement practices, recycling, reducing single-use items, reducing pollution, and achieving desired waste management disposal practices for the current pandemic goods and services as well as future pandemics.

Unfortunately, within Northern Territory, the discontinued funding of the National Litter Index means that we have lost forever and are completely unable to provide extremely valuable quantitative data and analysis of pandemic litter and littering behavior that is so invaluable and would have helped guide and shape Northern Territory's pandemic waste management policy.

Australians may continue using PPE once the current pandemic calm has been reached and this use needs to be sustainable. Littered PPE can create health and environmental issues if they are allowed to persist in the environment. A discarded mask can release masses of fibers with macro and micro plastics. It can also result in fauna entanglement or ingestion.

Within the first few hours and days, littered PPE, wet-wipes, and testing kits can pose a potential viral biohazard. The visual pollutant created by the visible littered items can also result in further additional littering within the immediate vicinity. In Darwin, the Wet season rain wind and storms can move and carry the littered items down storm water drains and into creeks, streams, and costal marine environment. The long-term result and legacy of littered PPE is breakdown into micro-plastics entering lower food chains with toxic affects plus leaching of chemicals and metals into the ground.

If you are a mask or test kit user please dispose of materials responsibly, read and follow the manufacture's waste disposal instructions.

If you are a pandemic materials, goods, or service provider, please act responsibly and regularly review your whole operations to help minimize environmental impact.

Let's all work together and please Do the Right Thing,

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Yours sincerely,

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