

WHAT DO WE NEED TO DO AFTER MEM?

Australian Council of Recycling CEO Pete Shmigel gives the recent Meeting of Environment Ministers a tick, but a number of areas don't passing muster. He explains why.

As a young man starting in the workforce some 30 years ago, an experienced pro once said to me: "There's two key ways that things get done in public policy. The first one is checklists."

It's against a checklist that we should evaluate the Meeting of Environment Ministers (MEM) that took

place for the only time this year on November 8. At that meeting, all jurisdictions' ministers approved the National Waste Policy (NWP) Action Plan and a timetable for implementing COAG's ban on waste exports.

If we're aiming for optimal resource recovery in Australia, and the transition to the circular economy we all like to talk about now, what needs to be ticked off on a checklist and what do we now have after MEM? Here's a go at it:

ASPECT	COMMENT	STATUS
Political and bureaucratic "buy in"	Based on community interest and emerging trends in Asia, there's unprecedented engagement, including at prime ministerial level for resource recovery and through three (!) active Commonwealth Ministers. As it should be. According to a poll conducted by the government's own pollsters, 90 per cent of Australians expect greater government action in support of the recycling industry – an unprecedented figure.	Tick
Stakeholder "buy in"	Stakeholders almost universally agree that increased resource recovery is an environmental, social and economic good that's worth pursuing. And, public goods are what we direct public expenditure at.	Tick
National policy with objectives	The NWP and its Action Plan are the first such milestones in more than 10 years. However, it's still largely a "waste" policy rather than the shift we should be pursuing: jobs, environmental and trade sovereignty gains driven by the remanufacture of secondary materials by a domestically sustainable industry. We see such a direction in South Australia, Queensland, and Western Australia now. Hopefully, NSW, Victoria and Tasmania step up as they go through current policy development processes. But, even with the criticism at the national level, what we have now is much better than the big fat nothing we had for half a generation.	Tick
Resource recovery targets	The NWP and its Action Plan deliver an overall resource recovery target of 80 per cent, a target to halve organic waste, and very ambitious targets for the environmental management of packaging. That lead figure represents an improvement on all state-based targets, and a commitment to improve on the current approximate national recovery rate of about 62 per cent that we seem to have plateaued at.	Tick
Sustainable markets for collected materials and/or other economic instruments	Targets at the above levels have not been achieved elsewhere using the largely voluntary framework that Australia is currently wedded to. The waste levy – different in every jurisdiction – is not a sufficient driver of outcomes especially for more heterogeneous and lighter materials, and where it is not sufficiently reinvested into the resource recovery system and especially infrastructure. Take the example of plastics – where there's now a 70 per cent recovery target for packaging and a pending ban on exports. Currently, there looks to be less than 200,000 tonnes of organic domestic demand for plastic recyclate and about 200,000 tonnes exported. To meet the ban and hit the target, we not only have to find a new home for the 200,000 currently exported tonnes but perhaps an additional 600,000 on top of that. Further to relying on voluntary commitments to recycled content use, especially in packaging, decision-makers may have to get serious very quickly about what additional economic instruments and regulatory support may be needed to hit the very big numbers before us.	
Infrastructure for collection, sorting and recycled content product manufacturing	Depending on material (metal, glass, pulp/paper, plastic, and construction and demolition materials), Australia is at different points of industrial maturity. As a general rule, we're very good at the front end of collection and even sorting and less well developed on reprocessing and remanufacturing. Given the accepted public goal of domestic sustainability – and of very quickly meeting the ban requirement without extra landfilling or even illegal stockpiles – we will need strategic infrastructure investment. This is especially so in terms of decontamination equipment for mixed paper, and for enhanced sorting, shredding and washing plant for plastics. MEM acknowledged all this, but was quickly followed by news releases and comments from state ministers saying "we're tapped". ACOR isn't sure that holds water given the more than \$1 billion collected in levies and the fact that the Federal Government has actually come to the table with cash for the first time. Funding and resource allocation must be sorted soon, or we may badly fail.	Tick minus
Consistency and certainty in regulatory settings	MEM outlined a timetable for implementing the ban on waste exports which is a key step and now requires the further ones. This comprises a clear definition of commodities versus waste exports, targeted investment in infrastructure especially for mixed paper and plastics, and promotion of new markets especially recycled roads (where the Commonwealth has promised to lead). There was also some discussion of harmonising container deposit/refund schemes – which are working very well and could be better without unnecessary cross-border costs and greater public accessibility. MEM also – and illogically – squibbed it on not banning baled tyres immediately, as their environmental impact is clear and there's market capacity for them here. COAG needs to rectify this mistake. But we have a long way to go. Poor regulatory performance in one part of the system affects operational performance across the system. As one example, the recent bad decision by the NSW EPA to ban Alternative Waste Treatment can very negatively impact on achieving the national targets, especially halving organics to landfill.	Tick minus
Monitoring of policy going forward	Stakeholders have been promised involvement to ensure accountability. The Commonwealth has commendably increased its staffing resources in this area. We will need to watch this space, but let's be optimistic.	Tick
Allocation of funding for all of the above	See above. Only blanks were fired at MEM, but at least there's collective recognition that with investment, we risk invalidating our COAG promise to the Australian community. The blame game and cost shifts will lead to only one thing: big headlines about big stockpiles to the sky.	Tick double minus