

COLES

Australians have avoided at least 1.7 billion lightweight, single-use plastic shopping bags since Coles removed them from its checkouts nationwide in mid-2018.

But the supermarket has not stopped there, setting bold targets that place it ahead of the curve, including that packaging for its Own Brand products across grocery, meat and fresh produce departments will be 100 per cent recyclable by the end of 2020.

"Our customers are becoming more and more environmentally aware. They have told us they want recyclable packaging and that we need to make it easier for them to recycle," said Fiona Baxter, Coles Group Responsible Sourcing Manager.

In response, Coles has also committed to providing customers with more information on how and where they can recycle packaging.

According to Ms Baxter, these goals are being met by using the Packaging Recyclability Evaluation Portal (PREP) tool to assess and improve the recyclability of packaging across the Own Brand range, and by rolling out the Australasian Recycling Label (ARL) to inform shoppers about correct packaging disposal.

Ms Baxter points out that the PREP tool and ARL play a very important role in helping Coles achieve its goals.

"Customers need consistent, clear guidance on how and where to recycle and the ideal place to deliver that guidance is on the pack.

"If it is a cereal pack, the ARL symbols tell customers to put the box in their kerbside paper recycling at home and to bring the plastic bag back to a Coles supermarket for recycling through soft plastics recycling program REDcycle, which is available in all our supermarkets."

Rolling out the ARL

In 2018, Coles began using the PREP Tool to undertake the significant task of optimising the recyclability of packaging across its Own Brand range. In conjunction with this initiative, the retailer commenced the process of rolling out the ARL on pack, to meet its ambitious

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Even with lightweight single-use plastic shopping bags being removed from stores last year, Coles has reported that it continues to see an increase in the volumes of other soft plastic packaging being returned to its stores for recycling.

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One challenge facing the Coles team are the black plastic trays tinted with carbon black which cannot currently be recycled through the kerbside systems. This is not a result of the plastic composition or technical recyclability of the plastic, but because the optical scanners in material recovery facilities cannot easily identify the plastic type, due to the light absorbing properties of the carbon black additives.

Coles is currently working through alternative meat packaging options with one solution being Plantic trays. Plantic's barrier trays are made from recycled PET with a thin layer of Plantic's renewable barrier material which helps keep the meat fresh. During the recycling process, the thin Plantic plant starch layer washes away, allowing the PET tray to be recycled.

The move to Plantic meat and poultry trays has already provided one key solution to Coles' 'hard to recycle' packaging. More than 120 million of the new trays were ordered in 2018, all of which are suitable for recycling through household kerbside collection systems.

The retailer has also discovered challenges with multilayer plastics and the size of some packaging. Packaging such as lids and fasteners can fall through the sorting equipment in material recovery facilities and be lost to residual waste. By contrast, some large items, such as large flat plastic trays or large volume water bottles, can behave like other materials, be mis-sorted or cause blockages in the flow of automated sorting systems.

recyclable packaging targets and make recycling easier for its customers.

At the time of writing, Coles had determined that 73 per cent of its Own Brand products were packaged in materials that could be recycled at home or through REDcycle. While rolling out the ARL label for the large proportion of packaging which is already compliant, Coles also uncovered some 'hard to recycle' packaging. Coles is now working with APCO to find recycling solutions for difficult materials and collaborating with stakeholders across the retailer's supply chain to develop new packaging solutions to address those challenges.

One critical piece of that puzzle was already in place. After introducing the REDcycle soft plastics recycling program in 2011, last year it announced that REDcycle was available in all Coles supermarkets nationally.

REDcycle bins provide customers with a recycling solution for their soft plastics by accepting soft plastic packaging including plastics bags, food wrappers, bread bags, chip bags, plastic liners, frozen food bags, and rice and pasta packets, which currently are not widely accepted through kerbside household collection services. The ARL directs customers to 'Return to Store' packaging accepted by REDcycle.

"The PREP tool and the ARL label are a vital part of the sustainable packaging process for Coles. These tools will support us internally to deliver on our targets and demonstrate publicly to all our customers that we are listening to their concerns and working hard to change our packaging for the better," said Ms Baxter.

What about plant-based packaging?

Durable, lightweight plastic packaging has revolutionised the grocery business, delivering multiple benefits from maintaining food safety, extending product life, reducing food waste to reducing transport emissions and costs. But plastic packaging is also a challenge for some customers who are asking about plant-based alternatives.

"Coles has considered the new generation of compostable bioplastics made from corn, sugar cane and agricultural waste," Ms Baxter explained.

"However, Australia does not yet have the infrastructure in place to collect these materials from households and effectively process them in high-temperature industrial processing facilities, so Coles has chosen not to use these materials until we are confident our customers have access to appropriate disposal and processing services."

"Also, compostable bioplastics contaminate REDcycle and they don't break down if they end up in the litter stream.

"Coles is committed to using packaging materials that are recyclable in existing recyclable services – either kerbside recycling at home or through REDcycle soft plastics recycling in our stores," Ms Baxter said.

"Without the right collection, sorting and processing capabilities, compostable polymers are just another form of single-use packaging. And they have the potential to contaminate viable plastic recycling streams."



The Coles ARL story so far...

With about 5,000 Own Brands products currently available, the ARL rollout is a work in progress. So far, 1,176 products include the ARL but with every new Own Brand product and artwork refresh, Coles is working to incorporate the label on pack.

At the same time, Coles is continuing to introduce other packaging initiatives.

"One great example," says Ms Baxter, "is our Own Brand spring water bottles which are made of 100% recycled PET. This has eliminated the need for about 150 million bottles that would otherwise be manufactured from virgin plastic."

Progress such as this puts Coles in a great position to meet not only its own target of 100% recyclable packaging by the end of 2020, but also the 2025 National Packaging Targets:

- 100% reusable, recyclable or compostable packing by 2025 or earlier;
- 70% of packaging recycled or composted;
- an average of 30% recycled content across all packaging; and
- the phase out of problematic or unnecessary single-use packaging.

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