

# WOOLWORTHS

Joining the program in 2017, Woolworths was one of the first Australian companies to begin using the Australasian Recycling Label (ARL) on its product packaging to help customers properly dispose of packaging at end of life.

The team at Woolworths were excited to start using the Packaging Recyclability Evaluation Portal (PREP) tool to inform their decisions on which ARL to use and are now also using the PREP tool during the packaging design process to ensure that packaging is designed for recycling.

Nina Leatherday, Woolworths Packaging Team Manager, says: 'some of the results of the PREP assessment process were not what we were expecting, so the process of getting ready for the ARL has helped us increase our understanding of recycling.'

'Before signing on to the ARL we looked at the type of material in our packaging and used that as a guide to whether or not it could be recycled.'

However, she says, PREP highlighted other challenges, like the difficulties with identifying dark plastics within recycling streams, as well as issues with size, with some plastic items either too big, or too small, to be picked up in automated sorting.

'This process has really informed our choices. We are working on moving away from material types that can't be recycled, and any other design features, like dark colours, that might get in the way of increasing recycling rates.'

## Taking the confusion out of recycling labels

Now that they are rolling out the ARL on all new Own Brand products (or as they review existing products), Woolworths says PREP and the new labels have given them confidence in their recycling messaging.

'The ARL gives us speed, accuracy and confidence labelling our products with end of life instructions that customers can understand,' says Ms Leatherday.

'Customers all over Australia were confused with all the different types of recycling symbols.'

'As a consumer myself, I can see that the ARL is a big improvement.'



'This process has really informed our choices. We are working on moving away from material types that can't be recycled, and any other design features, like dark colours, that might get in the way of increasing recycling rates,' says Nina Leatherday, Woolworths Packaging Team Manager.



'Consumers are much more aware of, and interested in, packaging. They are paying more attention to packaging decisions and they are letting us know what they think,' says Nina Leatherday, Woolworths Packaging Team Manager.

Not only is the ARL providing a reliable, scientific basis for customers to make recycling decisions, but it also enables Woolworths to plan ahead. With more knowledge about recycling options Woolworths can better factor in sustainability in the planning stages, she says.

### Rethinking plastics

Like many other businesses with a high percentage of perishable products, plastics are a big challenge for Woolworths – as well as for customers who are keen on reducing their plastic footprints.

While Woolworths is reducing plastic – including the three billion plastics bags avoided annually by removing single-used lightweight bags from checkouts in mid-2018 – not all plastics are equal.

Ms Leatherday believes a more nuanced discussion about plastic is needed in the public sphere.

'We need to constantly weigh up the benefits of plastic for food safety and shelf life against the potential negative environmental impacts (of plastic packaging),' said Ms Leatherday.

When plastic was removed from bunches of kale, for example, spoilage accelerated and the

resulting increase in food waste outweighed the benefits of avoiding a relatively small volume of plastic.

'We realise there are environmental challenges with most packaging materials, so we are trying to identify the best possible choices, while ensuring we are not increasing food waste.'

The company will instead focus on ensuring that many plastics that can't easily be avoided find their way back into the correct recycling streams, using the ARL to direct consumers. They'll also look to increase the recycled content within packaging. For example, in late 2018, Woolworths' Own Brand 'Shine' dishwashing liquid was launched in a 100% recycled PET bottle.

Other recent innovations, like the redesign of the company's Own Brand plastic milk bottles to introduce a lighter-weight bottle, is enabling 400 tonnes of plastic to be avoided a year.

As a member of REDcycle, soft plastics can be returned to Woolworths stores. The 'Return to Store' conditionally recyclable symbol within the ARL has been especially useful in clearing up confusion about soft plastics. Woolworths has seen a large increase in volumes of soft plastics returned by customers in recent months.

The company has also taken on a role in the Marketing Advisory Committee for the ARL and PREP and has introduced marketing focused on ARL education in one of their stores.

'Consumers are much more aware of, and interested in, packaging. They are paying more attention to packaging decisions and they are letting us know what they think,' Ms Leatherday says.

For more information about joining the APCO community visit [www.packagingcovenant.org.au](http://www.packagingcovenant.org.au)