



The Big Bang

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The annual disposal of 245,000 end-of-life gas bottles¹ for barbeques, camping, lamps and heaters in NSW has created a dangerous and expensive liability for landfill operators, recyclers and the public. While other states are acting, the NSW government has overseen a policy black-hole with no plans to address the problem.

Potential 'bombs' with nowhere to go

Australians love barbeques and camping, but there is no simple system to safely dispose or recycle end-of-life gas bottles, particularly those that are not part of established 'swap' programs'.

With nowhere to go, 22,000 gas bottles a year become potential and in some cases actual explosive devices in metal recycling facilities, for example hidden under car seats and in fridges. A further 66,000 end up in landfills where operators without expertise in decommissioning gas bottles are at risk². A further unknown number are regularly dumped according to local government authorities.³

People are confused. There is little information, a lack of facilities and a high cost for individual consumers to dispose of the bottles, as each one requires testing and decommissioning. Planet Ark's 'Recycling Near You' website shows over 50,000 requests for gas cylinder recycling options were made in the last year⁴.

Recyclers paying the price

Between 20 to 40 explosions occur in NSW metal recycling operations annually. These result in fires, damage to equipment and the halting of recycling operations, causing significant financial burden.⁵ The viability of recycling in NSW, already suffering from lack of government support, is further reduced.

Recyclers have invested heavily in equipment to avoid the impacts of gas bottle explosions. In 2006 Sell and Parker spent \$2.75 million to install equipment specifically designed to prevent the explosion of hidden gas bottles. Metal recyclers have also been forced to undertake manual inspection of each potential 'hiding place' for gas bottles as material enters their facilities. This involves significant labour costs and OH&S risks – and is no guarantee against a well-hidden gas bottle from getting through the net.

¹ Hyder Consulting, "Gas Cylinders in New South Wales – Market Analysis" Page 6, April 2008

² Ibid

³ Ibid

⁴ Planet Ark, Statistics incorporate the year between 30th April 2008 and 1st May 2009

⁵ Hyder Consulting, " Gas Cylinders in New South Wales – Market Analysis" April 2008

Hypocritical NSW Government Policy

The NSW government has resisted calls to provide a simple disposal pathway for end-of-life gas bottles. To the contrary, the Department of Environment and Climate Change continues to prosecute metal recyclers for the explosions.⁶

In contrast, the Victorian Government has spearheaded the development of a product stewardship scheme, engaging gas bottle manufacturers, retailers, refillers, swap operators, local councils and environment groups to develop a simple, accessible take-back scheme.

Despite being encouraged to participate, last year the NSW government withdrew its support for this project, recently declining to contribute a mere \$6500 towards the scoping of a scheme supported by all stakeholders.

The Solution

Victoria is on the right track, engaging swap operators and transfer station operators to play host to unwanted gas cylinders. They are however excluding small single use camping cylinders from this trial, simply identifying them as “too hard” to include. It is hoped this voluntary take back approach will be tested from October 2009 forward. A good start, but a sustainable solution requires the inclusion of all cylinders, strong recovery targets, timeframes, review processes and the involvement of all states.

The Total Environment Centre is calling for –

- DECC’s immediate participation in the Victorian-led initiative
- Implementation of a comprehensive scheme by January 2010
- Annual independent review and public reporting of the scheme’s gas cylinder recovery rates
- Robust targets, developed in consultation with the community
- A guarantee that all recreational-use gas cylinders are included in the scheme
- A plan to address ‘throw away’ gas cans
- A commitment to product stewardship regulation if the voluntary scheme fails to meet targets.

⁶ Land and Environment Court of New South Wales, Environment Protection Authority V Sell and Parker Pty Ltd, 16 February 2007.