



# ***NATURAL RESOURCES, AGRICULTURAL INDUSTRY DEVELOPMENT AND ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE***

**Members present:**

Mr CG Whiting MP (Chair)  
Mr PT Weir MP  
Mr DJ Batt MP  
Mr JE Madden MP  
Mr BA Mickelberg MP  
Mr MP Healy MP

**Staff present:**

Dr J Dewar (Committee Secretary)

## **PUBLIC HEARING—INQUIRY INTO THE WASTE REDUCTION AND RECYCLING (PLASTIC ITEMS) AMENDMENT BILL 2020**

### **TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS**

**TUESDAY, 4 AUGUST 2020**

**Cairns**

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### **The committee met at 2.30 pm.**

**CHAIR:** Good afternoon. I declare open this public hearing for the committee's inquiry into the Waste Reduction and Recycling (Plastic Items) Amendment Bill 2020. I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet today. Thank you for your interest and for your attendance here today. My name is Chris Whiting MP. I am the member for Bancroft and chair of the committee. The other committee members here with us today are Mr Pat Weir, deputy chair and member for Condamine; Mr David Batt, member for Bundaberg; Mr Jim Madden, member for Ipswich West; and Mr Brent Mickelberg, member for Buderim. We also welcome Mr Michael Healy, member for Cairns, who is substituting today for Ms Jess Pugh, the member for Mount Ommaney. Thank you for hosting us in your electorate today.

**Mr HEALY:** Thank you very much. It is a pleasure to have you all here.

**CHAIR:** Thank you. The hearing is a proceeding of the Queensland parliament and is subject to the standing rules and orders of the parliament. The proceedings are being recorded by Hansard. All those present should note that it is possible that you may be filmed or photographed during the proceedings and images may also appear on the parliament's website or social media pages. I ask everyone present to turn mobile phones off or to silent mode.

On 15 July 2020 the Hon. Leeanne Enoch, Minister for Environment and the Great Barrier Reef, Minister for Science and Minister for the Arts, introduced the Waste Reduction and Recycling (Plastic Items) Amendment Bill 2020 into the parliament. The bill was referred to this committee for examination, with a reporting date of 28 August 2020. The purpose of this afternoon's hearing is to assist the committee with its examination of the bill.

### **FURNER, Mr Troy, Owner, Blackbird Espresso Coffee**

**CHAIR:** I invite you to make an opening statement, after which we will have some further questions for you.

**Mr Furner:** Honourable members of the committee, thank you for your time today and for allowing me to voice my opinion on this important and much needed bill. My name is Troy Furner. I, with my wife, have lived in this region for the best part of 10 years. I am a father of two beautiful children and am a local business owner, operating two cafes and a coffee wholesale business supplying over 70 businesses, from Ingham through to the Torres Strait. Call it a coincidence or not, but today actually marks the sixth anniversary of my wife and me opening our cafe here in Cairns.

Only two hours ago I got off a flight from the beautiful Torres Strait, a region that is at the front line of the war on waste, with no local recycling programs and with pristine beaches with water the clearest you will ever see littered with microplastics and with single-use items constantly washing up on its shores. If you have not had the chance to visit this beautiful part of the world and experience the beauty, people and culture, I strongly encourage you to do so. Over the weekend, on a short beach walk on Thursday Island I counted hundreds of pieces within as many metres of plastic and glass wash the beach, much of which washes ashore from southern Asia and all around the world.

We in Cairns neighbour the Great Barrier Reef, with our daily activities having a direct effect on this World Heritage wonder of the world. On a trip to the Reef HQ Aquarium Turtle Hospital in Townsville we witnessed firsthand a beautiful green turtle with a plastic straw lodged in its nostril, affecting its breathing and food consumption. At this moment my wife and I knew that we could do our part by no longer using plastic straws and reducing our other single-use plastics.

We opened our cafe with the mindset that we as business owners in this region have the ability to choose products and business practices that will have less impact on these important areas that surround us. We had hoped that, being a wholesale supplier, we would set an example for other businesses. We have been able to do this through different programs like the Green Caffein re-usable cup-sharing platform, the StrawNoMore project and Plastic Free Cairns, in which we became the first plastic-free champion cafe in this region. We have since also committed to become the first 100 per cent plastic-free wholesaler in Far North Queensland.

We have found these practices easy to implement, well supported and very rewarding. My dream is that my children's children will grow up and dive the Great Barrier Reef as I love doing and experience turtles in abundance, that they will walk these shores and see no plastic and only what the earth had intended. I hope that you also share this vision with me and that this bill will move through parliament and do what is right for future generations to come.

**Mr HEALY:** Troy, thank you. That was very passionate and terrific. Firstly, congratulations on being the first plastic-free cafe in our part of the world. I think that is a fantastic outcome. I am acutely aware that a lot of people are moving towards that. You and your wife, your business partner, made a conscious decision to pursue alternatives. How difficult was that? Was it an additional cost? How difficult was it for you to say, 'We are not going to use plastic; we are going to use alternatives'? Did that come at a cost?

**Mr Furner:** It was not difficult. We have a relationship with BioPak, one of the biggest suppliers in the country in this area. We were fortunate enough to access their full range and bring it directly to Cairns. That is the main product that also wholesale on now. Obviously there is a cost difference in that, the biggest at the moment probably being coffee cup lids. We are the first 100 per cent plastic-free wholesaler in the area. We have gone to a 100 per cent PLA lid. That does have a significant price increase to it.

In my opening I said that we have about 70 wholesale customers we work with. We believe in it so much that we have actually offered an incentive to the cafes that we supply. We are actually passing on these lids at no choice to them. We have made the decision for them that we will give them one kilogram of free coffee to make up the difference in price for them to change over to the PLA lids until it becomes legislated in the state. They are readily available. Every year that I visit the Melbourne International Coffee Expo I see that there are at least another two or three new alternatives popping up.

**Mr HEALY:** Excellent. That sounds terrific. What would you recommend to government to allow organisations or businesses similar to yours to speed up the process of deplasticising their environment? How would you encourage them?

**Mr Furner:** I do not know. I think there should be marketing around how bad plastic straws and some of these particular products are. There should be a push on that. We in town here have just come on board with Green Caffein, a re-usable cup-swapping system. We launched that with them only two weeks ago. They were telling me that the Sunshine Coast is an area that has been really slow to adopt that approach. It did not make sense to me, being a similar ocean kind of lifestyle down there. I think there needs to be some awareness put out there for it.

**Mr HEALY:** So an education program associated with that for business?

**Mr Furner:** I believe so, yes—just showing people the effect it is having on our ocean life and beaches. When we first started the business our first supplier was not BioPak. We still went for plastic-free cups, but the lids we were using were plastic. It was not until one of my wholesale customers wanted some particular BioPak products that I looked into them more. I ended up ordering all this stuff for her, because we had this relationship through another supplier with BioPak. It blew me away. I had in my head that BioPak would be more expensive, naturally. There were at least half a dozen products that I saved money on in switching to biodegradable rather than using other alternatives. Yes, a couple of products were more expensive but, in the end, it all balanced out by far, if not more to the side of being plastic-free. It is just about taking the time to have a look at what is actually on offer and having more education about it.

**Mr WEIR:** Most of the cafes in my area recognise that there has been a march towards this over a period of time and a lot are slowly transitioning themselves. This bill talks about a plate, a bowl, an item of cutlery, a straw or a stirrer. In your business, are there any other things for which you have found alternatives that you think should be included in here?

**Mr Furner:** Are you asking if we found alternatives to stirrers and so on?

**Mr WEIR:** Anything not included in those—the cutlery, the plates, the straw. Is there anything else that you use in your business that you have replaced with a biodegradable product that perhaps is not one of those items listed?

**Mr Furner:** I believe any of the single-use plastics should probably be looked at. I understand that soft drink bottles and water bottles would be a massive change. Definitely things like coffee cups and lids should be at least PLA. We have changed all of our stirrers. We have gone to biowood instead of plastic. I was surprised when looking at the bill earlier to see that coffee cup lids were not included.

**Mr WEIR:** There is an alternative?

**Mr Furner:** Definitely, yes.

**Mr WEIR:** You have absorbed that cost yourself?

**Mr Furner:** We already have, yes. We have gone to the PLA plastic but you can use BioCane coffee cup lids. Like I said, there are more and more options coming out all the time. We have found that even some of our customers are the ones pushing. There are definitely a lot of people who will only use their own keep cups and want to eliminate the single-use cup all together. There are others who will go to particular cafes just because they do not have plastic lids.

**Mr MADDEN:** Do you get people who come in and say, 'I just want the cup, no lid'?

**Mr Furner:** Yes, definitely.

**Mr MADDEN:** I am interested in the issue of metal spoons and cutlery. Is it an impost for you to use and wash those, as opposed to using a disposable stirrer? Is it economical?

**Mr Furner:** Definitely. It is just about having your business set up properly for it. I would not have a whole bunch of metal spoons on hand for the customer just to help themselves to and use.

**Mr MADDEN:** Maybe one per cup?

**Mr Furner:** With dine-in obviously, but just things like instead of having a station where the customer goes and puts their lid on and does their own sugar and all that, you just do it when you are making their coffee. That is what we do. We will ask them if they want sugar in their coffee and we do it all for them, so there is no need for them to even have a stirrer.

**Mr MADDEN:** It is good to hear that people are coming in and asking for coffee in the disposable cup without the lid, because the lid is a contentious item. We have had paper cups forever. It is good to hear that.

**Mr BATT:** What is PLA plastic?

**Mr Furner:** It is a plant based lining instead of plastic.

**Mr BATT:** It is just the name of something that they built years ago?

**Mr Furner:** It is made with the lining of plants. It is a bio-oil or whatever is used to formulate it.

**Mr BATT:** You mentioned the Green Caffein swap-and-go coffee cup scheme. Can you run through what that is all about?

**Mr Furner:** It was started by two fathers on the south coast of New South Wales. Their story is that they were just two surfer dads going for coffee every morning after a surf and always using these cups. They thought that surely there should be something better out there. They have developed a re-usable cup—like a keep cup or whatever you want to call it. They are supplying the cups to cafes for no cost.

The customer downloads an app onto their phone and signs up. They have to put a credit card into the app. When they come into the cafe, they can choose to have their coffee made in this cup. We make it for them. They have to scan a QR code, which essentially works like a library loan. A cup is assigned to their account. They take the cup away and then they can bring it back and scan it back into the system. They use this cup for free. We put the cup back into our normal washing area and put it through the commercial dishwasher. We make their coffee in a new cup for them to take again.

How it works as it grows and gets even better is that they could pick up a cup from my cafe, drop it at the cafe down the road the next day or they could jump on a plane to Sydney and drop it at a cafe that has them down there. It becomes this big network and sharing system. They have to put their credit card in because if they do not return the cup into the pool within 30 days they get charged \$12 for the cup. It is fantastic. It is a 100 per cent recyclable plastic cup. I believe they have been partnering with a lot of councils down south. They did a big launch around Canberra. It has been going really well so far.

**Mr HEALY:** Troy, in your time in this industry, have you seen your wholesalers and your suppliers—the people you are buying from—change what they are promoting and pushing? How has it changed in five or 10 years? Is there a better range? Is it getting more cost-effective? Is it becoming easier for you to make those changes? Can you see industry changes in the supply line?

**Mr Furner:** Yes, definitely. I have been in the industry 20 years since I finished school. The majority of that time has been in the wholesale side of the business. I have been around packaging a lot. Five or 10 years ago there probably would not have been such a thing as a paper straw or something like that. BioPak are really good in developing new products. They are constantly working

on different things. Now you can buy burger clams, food trays and all sorts of things from them. Paper straws have come down in cost as well. They were quite expensive when they first came out. Now there are so many options for them as well. Every time I go to the Melbourne International Coffee Expo there are always a few more suppliers there and the range keeps growing and growing.

**Mr HEALY:** I assume that as the range grows the price becomes more palatable for a small business like yours?

**Mr Furner:** That is the hope, yes.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** Mr Furner, you mentioned food trays. We heard this morning about some of the logistical challenges with replacing polystyrene food trays when it comes to oil seepage and that sort of thing. Clearly you do not use the polystyrene alternatives; you use paper based ones. I am keen to hear about your experience with respect to the practical usage, whether there were problems with seepage or it was all fine.

**Mr Furner:** We are not a big food business. We are predominantly coffee. Our food range extends to banana bread and cakes. Obviously hot toast and banana bread can create a bit of oil and mess. We have not had any issues with them at all. We use a BioCane base. I think they are superb. They look fantastic. They are easier to use. I was just up on Thursday Island seeing Ma:Kai Cafe. They are 100 per cent go for all the burger clams and everything through BioPak. That is all the BioCane and paper and cardboard. They have no issues at all.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** In terms of marketing, do you get a particular clientele because you are plastic free? Have you ever tried to quantify what that would look like in terms of percentage?

**Mr Furner:** It is definitely a great marketing tool for us. The new partnership that we have moved forward with with Plastic Free Cairns has only been of late. We will start marketing that more, I guess. It is an easy sell to go to a customer and offer them something that is plastic free. When we are getting such good pricing through BioPak, I can easily put it against another supplier who is selling the opposite. Nine times out of 10 I am beating them on price.

**CHAIR:** Tell us a bit about Plastic Free Cairns. You are obviously an ambassador for them or a champion for them. We would love to hear a bit more about the campaign.

**Mr Furner:** I can only tell you as much as I have seen. I believe that they are a non-government organisation working with local cafes in particular areas. I believe that they have already gone through Plastic Free Noosa and some other areas of Queensland. I am not sure of her role, but I think the leader of the plastic-free movement in Queensland is talking with your committee in Brisbane at some point.

Helen is the local lady. She is really lovely. She got in touch with us. She came in and did a consult with us and went through the different products that we had on board. If there were things that we were unsure of or that we were thinking of other alternatives for, she worked with us to help find them. She carries around a few samples of different lids and things like that. We have recommended to her some of our customers as well. She has gone in and helped them. The only shame is that she works within the Cairns area. I have been trying to encourage her to get up to Port Douglas, but she is stuck working in the Cairns Regional Council area. They have been a really good help, and it is great to get behind cafes doing the right thing.

**CHAIR:** You found it a quite good experience for you to be part of a wider campaign, but once again it is a positive in your business to have that under your belt?

**Mr Furner:** Yes, definitely. She is why I am here today. She made me aware of the hearing and I said, 'Yes, I definitely want to be part of it.' It gives us an easier link to the different bodies of government and to working together with the other cafes in town.

**Mr WEIR:** Has the onset of COVID made a difference to the number of takeaway cups that you are using in comparison to keep cups?

**Mr Furner:** Definitely. We are struggling to keep up at the moment with packaging through our wholesale side of the business. I know the wholesalers in the country are the same. We would probably sit at 60 per cent to 70 per cent takeaway on a normal day anyway. At times we were 100 per cent.

**Mr BATT:** Do the swap-and-go cups cause any issues with COVID? Can you still do that?

**Mr Furner:** They are only working with cafes who have commercial dishwashing ability. We are taking the cup that comes back into stock into a dedicated area or bucket and it goes straight to the washing area. In normal circumstances, a keep cup would come through our till straight to the barista. It has been a better system for the whole COVID scenario.

**Mr BATT:** You use polystyrene alternatives. Polystyrene is not listed in this bill, but we have quite a few submissions saying that it should be. Are your thoughts that everyone could do something if it were put into the bill, that anyone in your circumstance—coffee shop, takeaway shop—has alternatives?

**Mr Furner:** It is not often that I come across a polystyrene cup now. I just think there would be no excuse for it, really. You will find them at a truck stop or in hospitals and things like that. I cannot believe that the Cairns hospital is not plastic free. It is terrible.

**Mr BATT:** If you go to the council, they probably have them as well.

**Mr Furner:** Quite possibly, yes. I would not be surprised. In terms of cafes, I would hate to think there is a cafe in Cairns that would still have them these days. Paper cups have come down in cost in comparison.

**CHAIR:** Are there any further questions?

**Mr HEALY:** No, but I have to look into the hospital, though.

**CHAIR:** We will leave that one with you, member for Cairns. There being no further questions, Troy, thank you very much for appearing before the committee today.

**Mr Furner:** Thank you.

**NASH, Ms Nicole, Founder and Manager, The Last Straw on the Great Barrier Reef**

**CHAIR:** I invite you to make an opening statement, after which we will have some questions for you.

**Ms Nash:** Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. It is an honour to be here and to be part of this bill that has been put forward. I will tell you a bit about my background. I have a Bachelor of Environmental Science, majoring in marine biology. I have also completed my Masters of Science (Natural Resource Management), and I have also conducted a research thesis on marine debris accumulation patterns in Queensland and Western Australia.

Whilst working on the water as a marine biologist in both Queensland and Victoria, I witnessed firsthand the impacts of plastic on marine life. Whilst writing my research thesis in 2016, I realised that I could make a difference and had to do something to try to reduce the use of this indestructible material called plastic. I did a lot of research and, rather than reinventing the wheel with what was already out there in terms of organisations tackling plastic, I found The Last Straw Australia—a campaign that was founded in the early 2000s and was already established for a few years. I created a branch of this called The Last Straw on the Great Barrier Reef.

My vision was to tackle vessels initially operating in the Great Barrier Reef in order to stop the pollution at the source from entering the Great Barrier Reef, initially starting with straws as they are something that many people do not really need. My movement had extensive research before I launched it, including consulting with the Tangaroa Blue Foundation and other professionals on what alternatives to plastic are not as bad in the marine environment. Through this, the only straws considered safer were straws that could soften or break down naturally.

As some people do need straws, venues that joined the pledge to never go back to using plastics could then provide an alternative should they wish to. The options that were allowed as an alternative to plastic included paper straws and re-usable stainless steel straws, just like an extra piece of cutlery—and the condition was that these were only given out on request. Other types of straws in a marine environment do not soften and can pose a threat to marine life by ingestion and entanglement.

As momentum grew, this movement then broadened out to all businesses within a 200-kilometre radius of the GBR coastline. After all, around 80 per cent of marine debris enters the marine environment from a land based source. Since 2017, over 375 venues have joined from a variety of sectors including bars, casinos, marinas, ferries, nightclubs, pubs, reef boats and individual businesses. As each venue registered, they were asked a series of questions to allow me to track the effectiveness of this source reduction plan. This included the venues listing how many plastic straws they used to use per annum. Extrapolating this data across all the venues registered, this equates to around five million plastic straws not in circulation each year.

As mentioned earlier, straws were initially targeted as a lot of people do not really need them. However, once venues realised how easy it was to go without one plastic item it soon became very competitive to get rid of more—exactly like my initial vision of the movement. As venues went plastic straw free, they often wanted to do it then and there, meaning that they had a residual of plastic straws. Me being me, I did not want to see them thrown into the general waste. As you know, plastic straws cannot go in general kerbside recycling or in soft plastic collection points at supermarkets, so I let venues drop them off at my doorstep and I had them posted to me. I ended up with 400,000 single-use plastic straws which filled an entire bedroom. I had a big problem and I had to work out how to do something with these straws.

Simply donating them to art and craft was not a long-term solution, and one day when those structures failed they would end up in landfill. I bumped into Replas—a recycled plastic manufacturer based in Melbourne which some of you might know already—and they had the solution to my problem. Thanks to the help of the Cairns Regional Council and Replas, who donated their time and effort, we manufactured a seat made of all of the straws, promoting a circular economy. Those straws were fully recycled through a separate plastic recycling process in Melbourne. That seat is now on display on the Cairns esplanade. If you do get a chance to visit it, it is located in the playground. It will be there forever for everyone to enjoy. We have had really positive feedback from families having recycling conversations with their kids thanks to the plaque on that seat. That is just one of many ways you can recycle plastic.

In the last 12 months things have slowed down a little for me in terms of engaging with venues, as many in Cairns are already single-use plastic straw free. In turn I have been working on post follow-up surveys with the 375 businesses that have registered with a PhD student from the University Cairns

of Tasmania where we are looking at the effects of on-ground efforts of a source reduction plan like the Last Straw on the Great Barrier Reef and how these tackle the reduction in plastic as opposed to the hard legislation enforcing requirement in the initial stages. This research will be published in coming years.

I believe that communities in Queensland have demonstrated that they can eliminate single-use plastics. They have done it, they are continuing to do it and this legislation would back the work that has been progressed with venues and businesses and give those sitting on the fence that extra push to make the change and make a positive change for our environment. I believe clear and key messaging is essential on the details in order to address the concerns of businesses and making sure the messaging in the bill is clear. We all have a social responsibility at the end of the day, and I believe this bill is the right step forward in making this happen. Thank you.

**CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Nicole.

**Mr HEALY:** Nicole, thank you. Your commitment, apart from the physical evidence obviously of 400,000 plastic straws in your room, to this task is absolutely commendable. As a community worker and somebody who has worked in the tourism sector, that is well and truly acknowledged. I just want to acknowledge that from the outset and say that you are doing fantastic work. I notice you have Citizens of the Great Barrier Reef, Last Straw Australia and Tangaroa Blue Foundation. I know Andy Ridley well and I know he is also very big on circular economies. How has working with these organisations helped you define what you want to do? Are they growing and defining? You started off with a singular challenge and that has grown, and obviously the challenge has exacerbated because plastics are in wide use in a wide range of areas. How has working with these organisations helped you?

**Ms Nash:** Tangaroa Blue, as you know, are the Australian Marine Debris Initiative, so they do a lot of clean-ups on our beaches and look at what types of plastic they are finding and target the source to stop the pollution. Initially when I liaised with them we came up with some clear messaging around the goals of the Last Straw which included the pledge which were the questions where we asked those businesses to track the change and make that happen. Tangaroa Blue are continuing to evolve with their beach clean-ups and tackle source reduction from things like weather balloons, which are put up every day—another plastic item—to glow sticks and all sorts of things out in the marine environment. Their focus is all across Australia. Citizens of the Great Barrier Reef is targeted to the reef region. They were established after I launched the Last Straw on the Great Barrier Reef. We have worked in collaboration to develop some interactive maps on that website, so if you go to the Citizens website you can click on their map and each town pops up where each venue is located that is a member of the Last Straw.

**Mr HEALY:** Which is absolutely fantastic. There is the consumerisation of products, but there is also an education here for consumers. Have you done any engagement with schools or education sectors? What sort of engagement have you had in those areas?

**Ms Nash:** Yes. I have done some presentations at local schools and through online emails in terms of answering students' questions. Molly Steer launched the StrawNoMore campaign which targeted schools in later 2017.

**Mr HEALY:** Are you involved in that?

**Ms Nash:** Not directly, no. Molly led the schools and I was tackling all those businesses that had alcohol and all of those sorts of things. Molly has had some great success with schools, I believe, in getting those registered.

**Mr WEIR:** You mentioned the involvement and support of council. In the broader community, particularly tourism, because it is such a big industry here, have you had much support out of that industry?

**Ms Nash:** Definitely. As Michael mentioned, I used to work out on the Great Barrier Reef both in customer service and as a marine biologist. I am pretty sure that 99 per cent of our boats now in Cairns are single-use plastic straw free. It is the same with Port Douglas. Some of the boats also went as far as removing juice boxes and Milos on board that have the plastic straw attached, so they were going to alternatives like pop-top juice boxes and those sorts of things. The tourism industry is so passionate about the reef. They know that plastic is an impact to the reef, not just directly but also indirectly through other mechanisms. It has definitely been supported and no doubt there will be a strong backing up here to have this across the line to support those businesses and tourism.

**Mr WEIR:** Is Last Straw or StrawNoMore in other countries as well, do you know?

**Ms Nash:** The Last Straw Australia was launched back in 2013. Since I launched the Last Straw on the Great Barrier Reef, we have had other ones pop up in Australia. I have also liaised with people over in Africa and the Philippines and there has been the Last Straw popping up everywhere. It has broadened and there is excitement mainly around social media where people are linking in and wanting to share that experience.

**Mr WEIR:** As long as they do not all send them to your place!

**Ms Nash:** That is right; I cannot take any more!

**Mr MADDEN:** Thanks very much for coming in today, Nicole. You must have been incredibly excited when you realised this legislation was coming through after all of your good work.

**Ms Nash:** Definitely.

**Mr MADDEN:** My question is with regard to alternatives to plastic straws. Can you enlighten us as to the range of products there are as alternatives to plastic straws?

**Ms Nash:** Certainly. Through my work with venues I have had many conversations and face-to-face discussions and most people were simply confused. There is a lot of greenwashing out there on products that are sold in Australia—from oxodegradable to biodegradable, degradable and compostable. There is a lot of wording out there and unless you do your research you really do not know what product you are buying. There are some straws on the market that are very misleading. They sound great, like an eco straw, but when you read the fine print there are actually plastic polymers still in those products. When I collected all these leftover straws, about 50 per cent of the leftover boxes that I collected were branded as an eco straw. After reading that fine print I learned it is plastic, I got in contact with some of the companies producing and selling these, both in Australia and overseas, to tell them that their messaging is very unclear and that they need to improve this. That is just one of the aspects.

**Mr HEALY:** Good work.

**Ms Nash:** I tried. This bill I think will help enforce it a little bit more, though.

**Mr HEALY:** Yes.

**Ms Nash:** With the marine environment, as I mentioned, some of the sugarcane products like PLA, which Troy mentioned, remain rigid when they fall in the water. PLA straws are very sturdy and durable and that is why a lot of businesses like them. Unfortunately, though, if you are out on the reef and do drop one in the water, it is going to take a long time for it to soften. We have all seen the picture of the turtle with the straw stuck up its nose. Paper will soften in the water. You have your plant based types of products, so sugar cane and bamboo—the actual straw people are now making straws out of real straw and paper products—and then you move into your mixed products, which are your bioplastics which have a combination of plant and plastic material.

Just thinking about all that in one word for one person who is sitting there just trying to make their straw order at the end of the day, you are just going to go for the easy option. If it says 'eco', you are probably just going to buy it, and in some cases you are purchasing the wrong thing. I think we need very clear messaging and to define exactly what is compostable, which the bill does touch on. Whether it is home composting or industrial composting is very important. Not all councils have industrial composting facilities, and that also requires the waste to be separated out and put into those facilities for the process to start. I think the education around that can certainly be improved through campaigns like Plastic Free Noosa and Townsville and a broader campaign on some of this.

**Mr MADDEN:** Yes, I get confused. I am aware that sometimes they use the word 'biodegradable' for a plastic that simply breaks down into smaller pieces of plastic.

**Ms Nash:** That is it.

**Mr MADDEN:** It can still go under that name. I would love to see the Acts Interpretation Act define 'biodegradable' so that people cannot just use it in a way that is misleading.

**Ms Nash:** Yes, definitely.

**Mr MADDEN:** I also see oxibiodegradable mentioned, which I understand means that oxygen has to be present for the degradation to the basic elements.

**Ms Nash:** That is it. You also then have composting, which can produce methane if it is not done in the right way. There are all of these things that can confuse anyone who is not used to the wording. It confuses me sometimes as well.

**Mr MADDEN:** I guess you are saying to the committee that there needs to be more done with regard to education with regard to words and accurate use of words when we are talking about alternatives to plastic which is made from petroleum products?

**Ms Nash:** That is it.

**Mr MADDEN:** We will continue on with that. Again, thanks very much for coming in today.

**Mr BATT:** You have degrees in this field and, as you said, it confuses you. Do you think it would be easier if this bill had some sort of wording to show what should or should not be used—product wise, chemical wise or whatever it is that is biodegradable or not?

**Ms Nash:** Yes, certainly. I think you could put exactly what constituents these products could be made of, like the Australian Standards. I went searching for those standards online, and you have to purchase those to find out exactly what that standard is. I think it is about \$20 or something. If you incorporate that into the bill or a regulation to spell out what products these are, I think that could definitely help the lay audience in terms of how it should be written for them to pick that up and say, 'This is what we can buy and this is what we can't to meet our obligations.' I think, too, potentially the penalty units could be higher for some of these types of things given that if the cost is not high enough people will just go to plastic because the cost of a fine will sometimes outweigh the alternative.

**Mr BATT:** Earlier you talked about juice boxes. You would be aware that they are exempted under the current bill?

**Ms Nash:** Yes.

**Mr BATT:** From your investigations or your studies, are there as many straws from juice boxes as others or are there less of them around? Is there an alternative that could be used so that we could go straight to not using those, rather than leaving them exempt?

**Ms Nash:** I think they definitely should be included in this bill. Businesses are already going to alternatives. Juices come in glass bottles and plastic bottles and some businesses have gone completely plastic straw free. Businesses like Troy's business have gone to glass bottles or even the Sunnyboys or cartons where you just tear the corner off.

**Mr BATT:** The old way.

**Ms Nash:** That is it: the old-fashioned way. I think the alternative is already there and we should not wait for some of these things if they are already readily available in Australia.

**Mr BATT:** There are exemptions for healthcare businesses, schools, people who may require them for a disability et cetera. In your view, are there alternatives out there already that could go to those places rather than exempting certain places for that reason?

**Ms Nash:** Yes. I read the RIS that was online. It talked about the consultation that was done with the disability sector. Through my own work, I have liaised with people in this sector who have mainly come to me and said, 'We want to make a change. We don't need single-use plastic straws.' One thing that was not really considered was that there are plastic straws that are re-usable that meet the needs of some people with disabilities. There are silicone straws. Silicone is plastic but it is mouldable. We can work towards that in the future with that sector to work out what they actually would like that meets their purpose.

I understand that most people carry things like that on them, from what people have told me. Just as people who have allergic reactions always carry their EpiPen, other people always carry their cutlery sets, straws and those sorts of things. The disability sector definitely needs to be considered for any bill change, which it has in this case, and long-term, re-usable alternatives, even if they are plastic, the key thing is as long as they are not used once.

**Mr BATT:** Rather than a biodegradable single-use straw, you would prefer they used the long-term alternative?

**Ms Nash:** Yes. There is no excuse for single use. That is what I say. You can always use something more than once. Even if it is plastic and you use it for 50 years, that is better than using 365 straws that are compostable each year.

**Mr HEALY:** I think it is fantastic that you have gone to organisations which have said, 'We're eco-friendly' but they are not. You have been a regulator yourself. You have spoken to a range of people, and I know it started with some of the reef companies. What do you think is the biggest resistance to change? I asked Troy the same sort of question. Is it the cost? Is it the fact that what needs to be replaced is not there? Is it incentives? What do you think? How do you think we could speed up the process?

**Ms Nash:** In some of the follow-up surveys that I have been conducting in the last 12 months, they are some of the questions we have been asking around costs. I have a couple of figures here that I can give you from these. One business in 2017 used 340,000 plastic straws. They then

registered with the Last Straw on the Great Barrier Reef and in the following year they used just 142,500 paper straws—so half of what they were using previously. In some cases the cost is higher, but my movement is that you only give out these paper straws on request. You are not putting them in every single drink so your consumption rates go down.

Some businesses went completely plastic straw free. One of the nightclubs here in Cairns used one million per year and they said, 'No, we're getting rid of them altogether,' so they are saving on costs. In this current climate, the hip pocket is what some of these businesses are concerned about. If they see that they can make savings by not handing out straws—whether they are paper or plastic—that is definitely the direction they will go. Most people say, 'It's going to cost me a bit more,' but, like Troy said, in some cases it is actually cheaper than they think.

**Mr HEALY:** I have seen that with a range of products on the reef. They have said that instead of having straws of different types they just do not have them. You are right: suddenly that cost just evaporated.

**Ms Nash:** Similarly, on the reef boats we got rid of plastic teaspoons and converted to metal teaspoons. That was an investment of \$100 worth of metal teaspoons versus a \$30 or \$40 order every fortnight. You can see that cost benefit straightaway. Sometimes just having that conversation with a business is all they need and they are sold there and then.

**Mr HEALY:** I think it is also an education process. People need to be looking at where they can make those decisions which would be economically advantageous. If you extrapolate that over a 12-month period, it makes sense to do that. Sometimes it is just getting that message out, as you know.

**Ms Nash:** Definitely.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** I did say I was not going to ask a question but I have thought of one. My question is in relation to franchisees, so fast-food type operators. We often hear that there is a lot of rubbish generated by some of the bigger fast-food outlets, like McDonald's. Have you approached any of the local franchisees of the big chains with respect to eliminating plastic straws? I am keen to get any feedback you might have gotten from those smaller operators as a part of a larger chain.

**Ms Nash:** I have spoken to some of them mostly over social media. We get a lot of people who call businesses out in some of our posts. When one business joins, they will tag their local cafe and say, 'Why don't you guys join?' and that starts the conversation. I have liaised with a few like the Coffee Club and Boost Juice. Some of the excuses are that they are a franchisee and it is not enforced above them for them to use these alternatives. Boost have made quite a few changes in the last two years and they do have a paper straw alternative. In Cairns I have seen that at Smithfield and the Cairns Central Boost store. One difficulty with franchisees is that they often have to get the direction of the bigger company. I think a Queensland ban would definitely help push those in Queensland in the right direction and that will flow on to other franchisees throughout Australia.

**Mr WEIR:** Last year there was a bipartisan group of parliamentarians sent to Port Moresby. The chair was on that trip as well. We were horrified at the rubbish that was blowing around Port Moresby and right into the bay. You were talking about your experiences in Western Australia and so forth, and I would imagine a lot of that comes over there. When you are talking about franchisees, do you think some of that could go into countries like that and help the situation in those areas?

**Ms Nash:** In different countries?

**Mr WEIR:** Some of our neighbouring countries.

**CHAIR:** The Pacific nations.

**Ms Nash:** Certainly. The research project that I did identified that primarily a lot of our waste accumulating on the east coast of Australia was coming from the Indo-Pacific region. We were able to identify that through packaging that said it was made and sold in Indonesia et cetera. Those hotspots do catch the waste through the East Australian Current and the prevailing winds. Educating our close nations would definitely assist to reduce plastic on our doorstep and our cost for recovering and recycling that material when it is collected by Tangaroa Blue.

**Mr HEALY:** Nicole, you have done a fair bit of work on this. Would you be able to provide the committee with a copy of your document?

**Ms Nash:** Which document?

**Mr HEALY:** Any of the documents you have done relating to what is being looked at here. You did a paper on it initially.

**Ms Nash:** Yes. That paper is not published but I can give you some statistics on what I have found. It was written with the data from the Tangaroa Blue Foundation that was collected over a 10-year period.

**Mr HEALY:** You can make any submission, so it does not have to be an official document, but I think you have a really impressive array of data which certainly could contribute to what is being put together here.

**CHAIR:** If that is okay, Nicole. Even if it is something on one page—a brief summary of the statistics you have that support your argument. That would be quite useful. It does not have to be from your published paper but what you think would be appropriate.

**Ms Nash:** Yes, certainly. I can give you some statistics on the types of venues that have registered in terms of averages of straws per small business, medium business, large business and nightclub or casino type as well.

**CHAIR:** Yes, statistics on who is using it, how you have done it and things like that.

**Ms Nash:** I probably cannot give you exact business names but I can give you figures.

**CHAIR:** That is fine.

**Mr HEALY:** I do not want to create any extra work, but I just think you have a really good body of work there.

**CHAIR:** You have for Nicole.

**Mr HEALY:** But it is good information. It is really good data.

**Ms Nash:** That is why I have done it for all this time.

**CHAIR:** There being no further questions, I thank you very much, Nicole. If you could give us that information by 10 am on Thursday, 13 August, that would be much appreciated.

**Ms Nash:** I can do that.

**Proceedings suspended from 3.23 pm to 3.42 pm.**

**COSATTO, Mr Steven, Manager, Waste and Resource Recovery, Cairns Regional Council**

**MOLLER, Councillor Brett, Council Representative to Local Authority Waste Management Advisory Committee, Cairns Regional Council**

**WUTH, Mr Mark, General Manager, Waste and Resource Recovery, Cairns Regional Council**

**CHAIR:** I invite you to make an opening statement, after which we will definitely have some questions for you.

**Councillor Moller:** As you may be aware, Cairns is uniquely situated between two World Heritage natural assets, being the Great Barrier Reef and our Wet Tropics rainforest, which, incidentally, is the oldest living rainforest in the world—older than the Congo, Borneo and South America. The natural environment is very important to the residents of Cairns, with the Cairns Regional Council conducting an Our Cairns survey back in 2016 with 6½ thousand participants. The three most important issues for our residents were job security and opportunities; preserving and enhancing our livability; and protecting our natural environment. Why I raise this is: as you have heard today from business owners and our residents, we are ready for legislation that protects our natural environment. We consider this bill one of those very important first steps towards that protection.

In relation to the content of the bill we note that, as a result of the public consultation and direct engagement with stakeholders, the single-use plastic products that are proposed to be banned are straws, cutlery, plates and stirrers for hot and cold drinks. I note that the policy objectives of the bill reference this as a start. There is an opportunity to increase that scope, and we will probably make a comment on that a little bit later.

What are the impacts of single-use plastics on the Cairns Regional Council? Our council has a very long history of being proactive in waste management and in the resource recovery industry. We introduced the yellow bin, a recycle bin, back in 1992. That was an opt-in initiative. We invested \$20 million in the Bedminster Materials Recovery Facility back in 1998. That was a significant and early investment. There was further investment in our MFR upgrade, another \$3.3 million, in 2005. The committee heard from Nicole in respect of the Last Straw. We also have supported Molly Steer's StrawNoMore campaign. Our council adopted that initiative, so we do not have straws at the Cairns Regional Council or at Cairns Regional Council events. At the 2018 Local Government Association Conference we successfully moved a motion for other councils to adopt that initiative, which they did. We were happy to lead that charge.

We participate in regional leadership in respect of waste management, most recently working with RDA Tropical North and the federal and state governments on researching plastics in Far North Queensland, the cape and the Torres Strait islands. From that, we hope to develop a regional template for plastic solutions. We see this as an exciting space to be in. In terms of technology and advancements, we need to get ahead of the game and to start this. We think Cairns and Far North Queensland is prime for this sort of initiative.

Why is banning single-use plastics important? As the committee heard previously, it is about our proximity to the Great Barrier Reef and about the plastics' impact on the reef. It is council and community that pick up the cost for the producers of these products. It is about the impact of plastics on the Cairns Regional Council, the environment, the reef and the tourism industry and its disposal to landfill. Single-use plastics are a product that cannot be re-used or recycled—that is, they cannot be part of the circular economy. We see a great opportunity for Cairns and our region to lead a green economy, a circular economy, an investment attractor, and to become the green economy capital of regional Australia, further diversifying and strengthening our regional economy. Green does not mean extreme, and transitioning does not mean that it happens tomorrow. We need a balance and we need a sensible approach so that there is no cost impact on our businesses or communities.

Council does do the right thing to transport recycling products to markets, predominantly in Brisbane, but in doing so we incur a negative financial impact on our budget due to a \$70 per tonne freighting cost. Cairns Regional Council transports about 6,000 tonnes of product to Brisbane per annum. A plastic ban will assist in reducing contamination levels in our MFR. I understand the committee had an inspection there today and I hope that was beneficial. Mr Wuth and Mr Cosatto can provide information on things like overall waste volumes, recovery and recycle volumes, landfill volumes and impacts of single-use plastics on our operations.

Regarding the proposed amendment bill, we commend the leadership from the state government and this committee as this amendment bill is an important step and builds on the recent plastic bag ban. More needs to happen. There are other issues in our waste streams with glass, paper and cardboard, tyres, solar panels, mattresses et cetera. The committee would have heard about these issues in waste management.

There needs to be state investment in education and communication regarding the amendment bill, not just with the key stakeholders and businesses but also with the public. In some areas there was significant pushback when the plastic bag ban was introduced. We believe that was partly due probably to some insufficient communication and engagement. We strongly recommend that the committee include an expanded polystyrene food boxes criteria in this bill as we feel this would encourage producers to utilise cardboard containers which would potentially create an avenue of opportunity for Cairns Regional Council and our MFR product, for example, from waste to energy or in the circular economy.

The federal government has introduced an export ban on mixed plastics from July 2021. This amendment bill aligns with that initiative, helping to reduce the impact on council's recycling and landfill costs. We see this amendment bill as only a start in addressing the challenge at hand. Greater investment is needed with regional solutions and market development. We need to develop a whole-of-life cycle—generation and use, collection and processing to end of life, and looking towards the future that will make Queensland a global leader in plastics management.

The New South Wales state government estimates show that about 10 per cent of our plastic waste is recycled and that 60 per cent of the litter in our state is plastic packaging and single-use plastics. We see the objectives as working with the federal government for mandating a 30 per cent minimum recycled content in plastic packaging. We see that New South Wales hopes to phase out disposable plates, bowls, cutlery, cups, stirrers and some other single-use food service items, expanded polystyrene food and beverage containers, plastic straws, the heavier boutique plastic bags and the oxodegradable plastics. We do not want to be behind the game; we want to be ahead of the game. We encourage the committee to consider that.

Our recommendations, we respectfully submit, in relation to the amendment bill are to not only include straws, cutlery, plates and stirrers but also expand to include polystyrene food and beverage containers and the heavier boutique plastic bags. We should also make the most of our plastic resources and assist with the establishment of recovery facilities. We need funding quarantined specifically for the plastic recovery, recycling and remanufacturing industries within Queensland, particularly in regional Queensland. Acknowledging the impact of the Chinese imports ban and the COVID impacts on local governments, for a period of time we ask government to look at relaxing the funding co-contribution requirements—that is, allowing already-in-place infrastructure and equipment and ongoing opex to be considered as part of the co-contribution. Often in regional Queensland, local government is the only organisation with the capacity for these forms of recycling, so local government and the state need to work together in this regard. We recommend the subsidisation of a collection network for soft plastics in regional areas—that is, the establishment of a hub-and-spoke collection arrangement for the collection of agricultural plastic waste, the T-tape, the drip line, the thicker walled irrigation tubing, master drums, crates, pots, soft plastics, rolls and coils. All of that agricultural activity needs to be somehow collated and transported to a regional hub. We need support in that regard.

In relation to reduced plastic waste generation, there must be a producer responsibility. This can be in the packaging, design and co-funding of litter collection or end-of-life recycling options. They should not be able to just produce the product, see it go out the door and then not care about it. There are things that these producers can look at. We encourage the state to encourage them to do that.

Public education is always important. We need industry education of what the state is developing and looking at into the future in respect of Queensland's Plastic Pollution Reduction Plan. It is a good document, but we encourage the state to work with local government and stakeholders so that we are aware of what you are looking at and what you are thinking and so that we can work together on this. Personally, I see this as a great opportunity for the diversification of the Cairns and Far North Queensland regional economy. It sits well with where we are located geographically and the cultural thinking of our residents. We commend you on the leadership. They are our submissions in our opening statement. Thank you for the opportunity.

**Mr HEALY:** Thank you for that opening statement. As the sitting member I can say that I work quite comfortably with the mayor and the council. For the benefit of the committee, particularly in this COVID time, which is quite unique, we are looking at new initiatives including the three levels of government—federal and state governments and the regional council. This is something that we will continue to push.

I agree that education is vitally important. With each of our previous speakers we have talked about education. What is the Cairns Regional Council doing from an education perspective to inform people about not just what they need to do? I remember seeing those ads about water. I thought they were unique, fantastic and carried a really good message. What is happening on that front? I accept that you have said the state needs to get involved in that area. We can look at that, but I am interested in where the Cairns Regional Council is from an education perspective.

**Councillor Moller:** I know that we do a lot of work with our schools. I know that our schools come out to our waste transfer station that you visited today. I know that we have a number of qualified people out there who talk to the schoolchildren in relation to waste management. That augurs well for our future generations.

**Mr Cosatto:** Last year we had between 3,000 and 3½ thousand visitors to our education centre at the Materials Recovery Facility. That was about 3,200 schoolchildren from grade 10 and under. We also had a couple of hundred people in community groups that attended the MFR and had a walk around. That process goes for about 2½ hours. There is about a 40-minute presentation by Scott that talks about the history of waste in Cairns and, from there, the challenges that Cairns faces.

Cairns Regional Council was one of the first to have a full-time waste education officer, certainly outside of Brisbane. We see this as the opportunity to instil beliefs in our youth. A lot of them already firmly believe in doing the right thing. It is a great way to get there, but it is a long journey. It is a long time before some of these kids are buying stuff, but certainly they are going home to their parents. That is the main education. We are currently reviewing our website. There will be videos about recycle right, recycle out. We also engaged a consultant to provide virtual tours. We want to show a plastic bottle that gets thrown in the yellow bin and travels all the way to Brisbane, and another plastic bottle that gets thrown in the red bin and goes all the way to landfill. These are the kinds of things we are trying to develop.

**Mr HEALY:** As a ratepayer, I was not aware that we had the first full-time education officer on waste. I think that is terrific. You talked about the 6,000 tonnes we are transporting down south. In relation to alleviation of fees, is that a request that has been made to government?

**Mr Cosatto:** Yes. This year we were successful in being granted, through the regional transport assistance fund through the Department of Environment and Science, a transport subsidy specifically for our paper bales. You had to be fairly specific in what you wanted there. It is a \$250,000 subsidy over 18 months. We advocated hard for that. Our CEO was quite keen on that, going way back pre levy. We see that the greatest challenge outside of Brisbane in recycling, remanufacturing and the creation of a circular economy is the logistics. We are very grateful for that grant.

**Mr HEALY:** What is the duration of that?

**Mr Cosatto:** It goes for 18 months or until you have spent the \$250,000.

**Mr HEALY:** It is a fixed amount?

**Councillor Moller:** In terms of the cost subsidisation, we say that the state government is better off looking to invest in a regional facility locally. It is about job creation and diversification of the economy.

**Mr HEALY:** I note that. That is obviously something we are talking about.

**Mr WEIR:** Obviously there is a lot of support for removing plastics and so forth. Has any work been done on either financial cost or advantage to council from this bill with these products? They still will have to be processed in some fashion, shape or form. Has any modelling been done?

**Mr Cosatto:** The passing of this amendment bill probably will not financially benefit council in the short term or in a fiscal sense. As Councillor Moller alluded to right at the start, the benefit is the bigger picture—getting the waste out of the waterways and the reef. Financially, though, it is one piece of a jigsaw or one layer of a platform. Banning of the plastic bags is one. This is the next step and there probably has to be another two or three steps for it all to come together. As to the actual cost benefit to council, there has not been a study or analysis done. Councillor Moller touched on the fact that we are entering into a project with the state government, Regional Development Australia and the federal government regarding a regional plastics options investigation project within Far North Queensland. That will provide us with a lot of data that we could probably present down the track. Again, that is probably something that would answer that question.

**Mr WEIR:** Is the proposal for a number of councils to feed into one facility or one area in the north or are you talking specifically about the Cairns council?

**Mr Cosatto:** Cairns is involved, but the state is involved and the federal government is involved. With all three levels of government—

**Mr WEIR:** I mean the Cassowary council and the others.

**Mr Cosatto:** Yes, it will branch right out. We are even looking at the Torres Strait islands and even perhaps Moresby and all the gulf area. That will be part of the business model of identifying the tonnages of plastic out there, the types of plastic and what can be done if we actually have a hub-and-spoke collection model contained within Cairns.

**Mr MADDEN:** As I understand it, Bedminster is your mulching facility?

**Mr Cosatto:** It is our advanced resource recovery facility. It is the only one in Queensland. It effectively takes our red-lid bin or kerbside waste—

**Mr MADDEN:** We are talking about organic waste?

**Mr Cosatto:** Yes. The red bin is about 60 per cent organics—food and garden organics—20 per cent recycling and 20 per cent residual waste, which is the stuff that you just cannot do anything with.

**Mr MADDEN:** We have mulching companies in Ipswich. Often they are controversial because of the encroachment of residential accommodation near those facilities. Certainly from the point of view of the product that they produce and the importance of that product for soils that will benefit from increased organic material, I think it is great that you are doing that. Could you tell us a bit more about how much you produce per year, what farmers are accessing, whether they vegetable growers or canegrowers and that sort of thing?

**Mr Cosatto:** We have two streams of organic waste. The first stream is the self-haul garden waste that comes into our transfer stations. We collect about 20,000 tonnes of that. That is the product that we mulch and turn into a compost. We engage two local contractors for that. They onsell it to the farmers or they work with groups of farmers. The acronym is GO, garden organics. Sixty per cent of our red-lid bin is made up of FOGO, food organics and garden organics. That is food waste and garden waste from lawn clippings, palm fronds, food scraps et cetera. The Bedminster facility uses heat and a digestive process and they also add in biosolids. At the end of that pipe they produce two streams: the residual waste that goes up to landfill in Springmount in Mareeba and then this organic compost that gets used on the local farms in Gordonvale. The kerbside red-lid bin is about 50,000 tonnes per annum. The Bedminster facility can convert 50 per cent of that into a product for beneficial re-use and the other 50 per cent goes to residual landfill. It is a great facility. There are challenges with that now because of these emergent wastes such as microplastics.

**Mr MADDEN:** You are producing two sorts of material; is that correct? Could you explain the differentiation between those two? Is one drier than the other? Is one more concentrated than the other?

**Mr Cosatto:** The primary difference between the organic waste streams is that the garden organics, the GO that is self-hauled by the ratepayers into our transfer stations, has no contamination—except for some guy trying to put the odd sink in there. The kerbside waste goes through a process but it has obviously been mixed with plastic bags, and even from cooking on a frypan you get all the oils in your food waste so it is not pure organics. With that there is also some discussion moving forward about whether that is the best use of that product.

**Mr MADDEN:** Ratepayers can collect the first one from your transfer stations?

**Mr Cosatto:** They used to. Council changed that just recently. We found that there was probably a little bit too much risk with seeds and weeds distribution, particularly up here, and pests such as ants—yellow ants, crazy ants. We now go through the contractors and they put it through a substantial curing process. We do not supply that anymore.

**Mr BATT:** Councillor Moller, when I brought it up earlier you mentioned adding polystyrene to this list of items, which was great. My question was around something else that could be used. We have talked about cardboard and contaminants. Earlier we talked about cafes dealing with oils that contaminate cardboard packaging. Can that contaminated cardboard still be used or does it make a lesser quality product to sell? How does that work?

**Mr Cosatto:** It is a little bit less quality. It is the same with the commentary regarding pizza boxes that get a bit of oil on them.

**Mr BATT:** Exactly.

**Mr Cosatto:** With the secondary process they do now, they wash and do a bit of shredding. Whilst there is a little bit of contamination, actual recyclers allow you up to two per cent contamination per tonne. It is acceptable and a far better outcome.

**Mr BATT:** Generally, for the Cairns council and other councils, is polystyrene a fair part of the nonrecyclables that you cannot do anything with and that go to the landfill at the moment?

**Mr Cosatto:** Yes, we cannot do anything with them. They go direct to landfill.

**Mr BATT:** When we were doing the tour you talked about plastic bags. I wanted to get this on the record, if you are happy to do that. You talked about single-use plastic bags being replaced by heavier multi-use bags—whatever you want to call them—but that you are still getting many of those through and the weight of that.

**Mr Cosatto:** Yes. With the introduction of the lightweight bag ban, we thought we would see a drop-off in plastic and a lessening of our residual waste going to landfill, but the tonnes have remained the same. Even though the state achieved one objective in reducing those lightweight plastic bags, the reality is that the residual going to landfill is the same. The weight is the same, because these bags are heavier. It is what it is. As I said earlier, it is one of the building blocks. Plastic is going to be around forever. I really commend the state: it is a stepping stone in the right direction with what the committee is doing.

**Mr Wuth:** I would add that that is probably part of our hesitation in suggesting how much of a cost benefit there will be to get some of these products out of the waste stream, because we are a little bit hesitant about what they will be replaced with. I think that is something that we need to be very mindful of as we look to start eliminating products from the waste streams. They are only successful if they are replaced with products that we can do something with or they are eliminated completely. That is a really important part of the message in this bill: it is not just to ban; it is to let us move towards a product that we can do something with. That is that conversation with producers and then also consumers to think about the products they are using and to think about how they might be used next. If we can eliminate those things from the waste streams, we can get those efficiencies and we will start to see some real benefit. We are obviously a little bit hesitant if it is just replaced with another thicker plastic bag that might be just as difficult to deal with.

**Mr BATT:** We saw the piles of what you cannot recycle, whether they are contaminated or they are plastics that cannot be recycled. Do you have percentages of that compared to what you can recycle? Can you see an alternative for most of the plastics that now go to landfill that in the future we could change to or is that too difficult?

**Mr Wuth:** I will ask Steve to talk about some of the percentages, but it is about getting that real clarity and being able to divide up the waste streams very cleanly. The cleaner the stock you can get, the better you can group those plastics together. Then it is to do with whether we have the right industry in terms of being able to deal with those soft plastics. That is probably a really good one. There is a reasonable percentage of the soft plastics through our waste stream that we cannot currently get to re-use. I think that is the key to making sure that we are getting the right industry and the right processes in the regional centres so that we can deal with the different plastics. We need to identify the ones that we cannot do anything with and we need to get rid of those. We then need to start working backwards to the ones that are the hardest to deal with and try to move everything eventually to products that we can use. I would probably shoot to Steve for a percentage of those unusable plastics that we are getting.

**Mr Cosatto:** I must stress this. As the committee is probably discovering, in our yellow bin there are seven types of plastics, but that is not even getting all of the plastics. There is another category called mixed plastics and also soft plastics. Our yellow bin accounts for just under 10 per cent of our volume of products. Whilst it is not a heavy item by volume, as you can see there is nothing I can do with those mixed plastics. Even when council is prepared to wear the \$70 a tonne freight cost, there is no market to send it to. We have a lot of well-meaning residents—it is called 'wish recycling'—who think, 'Oh yeah, this is plastic' and they can recycle it. The reality is that we cannot. There is a confusion that plastic should be able to be recycled, but it cannot. It is about 10 per cent. Those plastics are broken into heavy duty, light duty, the polypros. It keeps going.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** Earlier in the first session—I am not sure if you gentlemen were here—we heard about the replacement of coffee cup lids with PLA product. I understand that they are compostable, but how does that work in your waste process? Presumably they do not break down straightaway. Do they go into your composting stream or do you treat them as waste? What is the process there?

**Mr Cosatto:** We can treat them through our Bedminster facility. They can get broken down and turned into a beneficial re-use. As I said, we are probably the only ones who could do that at the moment. I know there are other councils looking at exploring mixing with the garden organics and those kinds of compostables or those products that will break down into their self-haul garden organics and trying a mix there. They are exploring those options, but there has not been much done in that space just yet.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** At the moment they go into landfill and presumably that is a volume question; is that a fair assumption?

**Mr Cosatto:** Yes.

**Mr HEALY:** This question is very broad. Since the MFR started, what has council seen develop in new economic opportunities with other businesses? All of a sudden you are starting to get waste. Is this an opportunity? Obviously I see components of it. The glass is separated and crushed and used in council water and waste operations. This is the industry of the future. I am wondering what has grown out of it, both from a regional council perspective and, more importantly, for businesses, because we are talking about growing that. I am wondering, because there is an example straightaway. I am happy for you to take that on notice if you want to.

**Mr Cosatto:** The \$70 a tonne freighting to Brisbane has really made us look at what we can develop locally. In our yellow bin there are three main components that we have difficulty with. One is the glass. We are converting glass into a three-millimetre-minus product that we use locally and through Cairns works. The glass makes up about 35 per cent of our volume in our yellow bin. Paper and cardboard makes up between 35 per cent and 40 per cent of our yellow bin. They are the two big bulky items. The commodity price for paper at the moment is about \$45 a tonne, so it is not covering freight. Through Councillor Moller, we have explored options with MSF Sugar to see if there is an option to utilise the paper in their mills. That will be a long-term option that we are looking at. It is not the best solution, but we want to explore it to see what comes of it. The third option we are trying to explore is plastics. We recognise that plastics are a challenge within our region. There is a local company that I am sure you are aware of: FNQ Plastics. It is quite ironic: we send our plastic to a firm in Brisbane that washes it, shreds it and turns it into pallets. They then send it back up to Cairns to FNQ Plastics. Just to give you some context, they have to buy those pallets at \$1,600 a tonne. It makes it very difficult for their business to stack up.

**Mr HEALY:** A good motivator to have something in the middle.

**Mr WEIR:** Mark, you talked about being careful with what you replace it with. Is there something that you have seen in here that you would have concerns about or are you making that statement on what happened with the plastic bags?

**Mr Wuth:** My statement was about what happened with the plastic bags. I guess it is more just cautionary. When we make changes, the industries will respond. It is about making sure that we are having that conversation up-front. I do not have a specific concern—I do not have a particular item that I think might be a particular hotspot—but I think that whenever we are looking at replacing a product we have to make sure we are replacing it with something better and not just the next problem.

**Councillor Moller:** To Mark's point, you have seen the recycling of the glass and concrete with footpaths. There are opportunities with plastics. In Cairns and Far North Queensland we are seeing pockets of small private enterprises in renewables but nothing bringing it together. Where I see the opportunity is for state and local government, through policy and funding, to get this industry up and running and then do what we do best, which is get out of the way and let private industry take it over. I think that is the future. I think that is where state, federal and local government should recognise the opportunity.

**CHAIR:** The time allocated for this session has now expired. We do not have any questions on notice. Thank you very much for coming along and appearing before us today.

**STEER, Ms Jules, Supporter, StrawNoMore**

**STEER, Ms Molly, Founder, StrawNoMore**

**CHAIR:** I invite you to make an opening statement, after which we will have a couple of questions for you.

**Ms M Steer:** In 2017, three years ago, my mum took me to see a movie called *A Plastic Ocean*, which was basically about how plastic gets into the ocean, fish eat it thinking that it is food, then they get sick and then we eat that fish, and how it is coming back to us and contaminating us. By the end of the movie I was completely on board. On the way home, we were talking and I said, 'Hey, Mum, I want to help. What can I do to help?' She said, 'The easiest way to start anything is to start small.' I thought the smallest thing possible and I thought straws. That Friday I went to my school and asked them if I could talk on assembly to all the kids about it. They said yes. After assembly, the school agreed to join the StrawNoMore project and stop using plastic straws in their canteen and tuckshop. Then some other schools heard about it and they jumped on board, too. Then it went from schools to businesses and then to cafes. Now it is individuals and everybody.

**CHAIR:** It is a wonderful story. Can you expand a bit more on the things you do every day? You said that you talk a lot to classes and other people. Tell us what might be typically involved in a day or a week for you.

**Ms M Steer:** When I go to talk to schools, the students are usually younger than me and usually it is either one grade or one class. Basically, we have some pictures and sometimes some games that they can play. We say, 'This is what is happening, this is what you can do to help and this is what it will look like if you help.' We talk to them about an army that we have made called StrawBassadors. They are basically people who go out to cafes and businesses in their own cities and towns and get individuals and everybody to sign the StrawNoMore project. We talk to them about that and then we ask them if they want to get on board.

**CHAIR:** Do you find that people are very open to talking to your StrawBassadors?

**Ms M Steer:** Yes.

**CHAIR:** I think you would have quite a few young people wanting to be StrawBassadors. Would you have quite a few working with you?

**Ms M Steer:** Yes, we do.

**Ms J Steer:** We just signed up the 600th today.

**CHAIR:** Wow! That is quite amazing. How widespread are those?

**Ms J Steer:** There are not too many in Western Australia, but apart from that there are a lot—certainly in South Australia, Victoria and the lower part of New South Wales.

**CHAIR:** Molly, how have you found this? It must have been a bit overwhelming. It started small but it became big very quickly, didn't it?

**Ms M Steer:** I did find that at the start, yes. Every time I think about that now I think about how much it helps that everybody knows, because the more people who know the more people who can help and the smaller the problem becomes.

**CHAIR:** Do you think you have started off in a really good place to do that? It looks like your community supported you straightaway and very heavily; is that right?

**Ms M Steer:** Yes, definitely. Because I grew up in Cairns, I was always going out to the reef every second weekend. Turtles are my favourite animal; I have always loved them. I think it was very helpful growing up in Cairns and having that environment to start it in, because so many other people are very passionate about the same thing that I was and they definitely wanted to help.

**CHAIR:** We heard today from Cairns businesses who very much share the same values and outlook as you did. Did you find that the businesses here wanted to talk to you and wanted to get on board very quickly?

**Ms J Steer:** Very quickly, yes. They were very supportive.

**CHAIR:** Thank you very much for doing this. What you are doing should inspire not only young people but also people like ourselves to do what we can to make a difference. Thank you for the inspiration that you give to the whole of Queensland.

**Ms M Steer:** Thank you.

**Mr WEIR:** How do you find StrawBassadors? Is it through Facebook and other social media?

**Ms M Steer:** Yes. StrawNoMore has a website. Every time we go to talk to a school we tell them about the website so that they can remember it. When you go onto the website you can either join the pledge or sign up to be a StrawBassador. It is pretty easy. You just say your name and then a couple of other things.

**Ms J Steer:** StrawBassadors must be under 18. It is a youth empowerment type of thing. When they commit to being a StrawBassador, basically they get access to my Google Drive, which has some artwork, copies of every speech Molly has ever done—they can modify it—and letters that have been written so that they can just go along and pretty much mould it to what they want to do. It is essentially just empowering the kids to go out into their own community and talk to people, to start that conversation.

**Mr WEIR:** Do you have more in Queensland than in other states?

**Ms J Steer:** No. It is quite concerning, actually. South Australia and Victoria—it is very heavily populated down there. We got exposure in Phillip Island very early on in the piece with a plastic-free Phillip Island and San Remo. They clearly have very long tentacles; it is a really big referral centre from there. As far as schools go, about 1,900 schools now have taken the pledge, including international schools.

We are very much coming from a non-scientific point of view. I did not do well in science at school. We are well aware that this not science backed. We are obviously taking a lot of advice from scientists, but we are not coming here as experts or anything like that. I think it is quite lovely that we are getting so many stories through. I had one just recently from a small rural school of about 150 kids in the west of New South Wales. They had picked up bottles along their creek bed and had done a lot of fundraising. They raised \$100 to make a big banner that sits outside their school now which says 'We're a StrawNoMore school'. Anything that starts conversation is going to be a good thing. They just start thinking, 'Is that actually necessary? Is it really necessary that we just use that one small bit of single-use plastic? Is there a better way to do it?'

**Mr HEALY:** Molly, outstanding work. Molly's mum, outstanding work. I was not good at science, either. In a very short time today we have seen that we have a regional council that recognises the importance. We have also heard from a business representative. It is a small group that obviously represents a wider community. Molly, you are the future. Jules, you are providing the hardware and access. I like that this is not about science; it about an emotional attachment. Where do you see this going? You talked about international schools. It is popular in New Zealand, South Korea and the UK. Do you just see it rolling on into industry as plastics become more of an issue? I know that you have greater aspirations for Molly in a range of other areas, but where do you see this in two years? Will you keep going or will you migrate to other issues?

**Ms J Steer:** We have done a bit of an exit strategy. I am very aware that there might come a time when Molly does not want to do this anymore. She has just hit 12 and who knows what is going to happen? I guess that is what these StrawBassadors can do. They can actually take the reins at some stage and continue to spread the word if for some reason Molly feels like having a break or finds a different interest. It is too good of a movement for it to fizzle away, so by getting all of these kids involved they can kind of become the StrawNoMore representative in their own town.

We have had great success in South Australia. There are two young sisters in South Australia who have been having a lot of talks with the South Australian environment minister. He has been consulting with them and working with them as they put through their legislation. It has been great that StrawNoMore has been included down there. It is just like little branches. In a couple of election cycles, these kids are going to be voting. This is giving them a bit of knowledge and raising the awareness about asking the questions: 'Is it necessary? Do I need it?' If you need it, that is fine, but if it is not necessary let us find a better way to reduce the waste.

**Mr HEALY:** Have you been doing any work with Citizens of the Great Barrier Reef or any of those types of organisations? Have they been supportive?

**Ms J Steer:** Hugely supportive. Andy from Citizens was one of the originals to get on board. Even last weekend, Molly and Andy were doing some work together. Nickelodeon TV from the United States were here filming with them not too long ago because Citizens has links with Nickelodeon. There are plenty of ways. Nickelodeon TV is a way to speak to our target demographic, which is kids.

**Mr HEALY:** Molly, what do you think? Where do you see this in 12 months time or two years? You have done such a wonderful job with the support of your mum. It is an important issue.

**Ms M Steer:** I think StrawNoMore started off with plastic straws and now it has moved on to all single-use plastics in general. I feel like in 12 months we may be going bigger.

**Ms J Steer:** Hang on!

**Mr HEALY:** You might want to let your mother know.

**CHAIR:** It is good to get this on the public record.

**Mr HEALY:** It is. Everything is being recorded, Molly, so we will come back to you on that one.

**Ms J Steer:** Mum is going to need a secretary!

**Mr BATT:** Congratulations, Molly and Jules. I think you are our youngest witness in the 2½ years we have been together as a committee so it is good that you have come. We have some statistics on the pledges. I think you said there were 778,000 pledges. How many StrawBassadors have you got?

**Ms J Steer:** It is 600 today.

**Mr BATT:** The pledges are for either 30 days or forever. Have you broken that figure down into those two categories?

**Ms J Steer:** We have but I cannot pull that figure up. I was trying to pull that up before but my link is not working.

**Mr BATT:** Would the majority be the forever ones?

**Ms J Steer:** Yes, the majority are the forevers. We did 30 days because there are a lot of people who were very hesitant to pledge that they would do it forever, which interested me because they are not signing it in blood. I thought we would put a 30-day option in there as well—a bit of a 'try before you buy'. We have quite a few of them but the majority are forever. A couple of years ago there was a turtle with a straw stuck up its nose and that turtle has done amazing things for the single-use plastics movement. It has been a bit of a poster girl.

**Mr BATT:** Even though it is StrawNoMore, is it that you do not want anyone to try even the recyclable straws, or is it just straws in general? Is that what the call to arms is?

**Ms M Steer:** Obviously, we know that there are people who need to use straws. There are actually alternative straws that are still good for the environment and that you can use more than once—like bamboo, metal, glass and paper.

**Ms J Steer:** One of our very good friends, who is a champion bloke, fell off his roof about 10 years ago and is now a quadriplegic. Around the time that this was kicking off, we liaised with him quite a bit and asked him what it meant for him. Since then, he and a whole lot of people who are differently abled have said that they actually take their own straws with them because they have a particular bend that they need. They do not rely on that restaurant or that cafe having flexible straws or having the specific type they need. I know that is always a consideration that you have to do.

We have had a lot of feedback from people who are fighting for the rights of those people who do need to use straws. I guess there is always that situation where they come prepared. It is certainly something that we are not blind about. We do understand that there are people who actually need to use them. I guess the message is just more: 'Do you need to use it? If not, can you think of a better way?' I was a straw user three years ago. I had no idea that any of this was going on. I would grab a straw and swizzle my drink and then just throw it away because I just had no idea.

**Mr MADDEN:** I would like to begin by thanking you both for coming in today. I am particularly impressed by the fact that Molly addressed her school. This committee meeting is going to be recorded in *Hansard*, so I thought you might like to mention the name of your school and the name of your principal.

**Ms M Steer:** My high school is Cairns State High School and my principal is Mr Zilm.

**Mr MADDEN:** That was very good of Principal Zilm.

**Ms M Steer:** He is a good principal.

**Mr MADDEN:** I am very impressed that you spoke to that school assembly. After you spoke, what was the reaction of your friends and the kids at your school?

**Ms M Steer:** I did not expect much from my friends because I knew that I could not force them to do anything, but surprisingly they were very supportive and they helped me a lot.

**Mr MADDEN:** Did you get any comments from the teachers?

**Ms M Steer:** Yes. My favourite teacher came up to me after and she gave me a huge hug and said, 'Good job, Molly.'

**Mr MADDEN:** There would not be too many students who would ask to address the school assembly so I think that is fantastic.

**Ms M Steer:** Thank you.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** Thank you for coming in today and thank you for all of your advocacy in this space. Earlier you mentioned election cycles. I have a five-year-old daughter who frequently corrects my behaviour on issues that I maybe did not consider. I am really interested in the dynamic as to how your StrawBassadors might influence the adults around them, even though you are pitching it at young people.

**Ms M Steer:** I think one of the reasons it has been so powerful is that it is coming from a kid. Usually kids do not have much to say and they are not really supposed to say anything and are to be seen and not heard.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** Someone needs to tell that to my daughter!

**Ms M Steer:** I kind of feel that people get surprised when they hear all of these facts coming out of a little kid and they are dumbfounded for a little bit. After that, they get a bit impressed and they say, 'Okay. I want to hear more.' The more kids there are, the more people will listen.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** Well done. Obviously, the fact that we are here today is a testament to all of the work you have done. We have heard from some of the other people who have given evidence today around the need for an education campaign. Obviously, we are legislating a ban on some single-use plastics. I am keen to understand any objections or any arguments that you have received from other young people about why they are not prepared to not use straws.

**Ms M Steer:** There has been some feedback. Obviously, we did not expect everybody to want to jump on board and we cannot force anybody to. Sometimes we do get some emails saying, 'I don't want to do this' or 'I need to use straws' and things like that. Some people just really do not want to.

**Ms J Steer:** There is certainly the situation of people who are unable to eat or drink without the aid of straws. That is the biggest one. Molly's brother still uses straws—usually two or three in a drink just to really put his point across.

**Mr HEALY:** That is a brother-sister thing.

**Ms J Steer:** Aside from that, there has been a bit of feedback from certain people that they do not think a kid should be brought to the table to have that conversation and they should not be getting so much attention. We have had almost overwhelming support I guess, aside from those factors, even from areas that you did not think were going to. I have been quietly impressed.

It was just very timely. I said it before about that turtle and I am not joking. Watching that turtle get the straw extracted from its nose did enormous things. There is actually a TED Talks about that turtle. That turtle essentially started a movement. Molly did not invent this. This was not her idea. People had been trying to do it for 10 years beforehand. It was just that this was timely and I think it was just targeted at kids. It was targeted at people who were starting to become more aware.

There are a whole lot of youth activists around the world at the moment and they are getting a bit more attention and media. I think it was just very good timing. I say all the time that if it was me standing up there saying 'StrawNoMore' then no-one would care. Part of the power of it has been that Molly was able to speak to people. They see Molly as just an ordinary schoolgirl, just a very typical kid.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** That is great. Thank you very much for all of your effort.

**Mr MADDEN:** Jules, just for the benefit of Hansard, how do you spell the name of your principal?

**Ms J Steer:** It is Z-I-L-M.

**Mr HEALY:** He is the executive principal.

**Ms J Steer:** Prior to that it was Edge Hill State School, just to throw that in as well.

**Mr BATT:** Do we want to get your favourite teacher's name in *Hansard* as well?

**CHAIR:** We had better not. The time allocated for this session has now expired. Molly, this bill is the Waste Reduction and Recycling (Plastic Items) Amendment Bill 2020 and section 99GB of the bill will talk about the single-use plastic plates, bowls, items of cutlery, stirrers and straws. When this bill goes through, I think you should be proud of the part in history that you have played.

**Ms M Steer:** Thank you.

**CHAIR:** We have no questions on notice. Thank you both very much for appearing before the committee today. That concludes this public hearing. Thank you to all of our witnesses. Thank you to Hansard and our secretariat. A transcript of these proceedings will be available on the committee's parliamentary webpage in due course. I declare this public hearing closed.

**The committee adjourned at 4.45 pm.**