

POLYSTYRENE AND LANDFILL: SEPARATING MYTH FROM REALITY.

Growing concern over local and national waste disposal problems has focussed attention on plastics and their environmental impact.

Some people believe that banning, taxing or otherwise restricting the use of plastic products will help solve these solid waste disposal side effects.

However such an approach could increase the use of alternatives which may have more undesirable environmental and waste disposal side effects.

Myth Banning, taxing and restricting the use of plastic packaging will help the environment and ease pressure on landfill space.

Fact Polystyrene packaging is extending the life of landfills in two ways:

Firstly polystyrene and other plastic packaging keeps food fresh and at the correct temperature for longer, thereby helping to reduce food spoilage. (Already over 30% by weight of Australian domestic garbage is wasted food**).

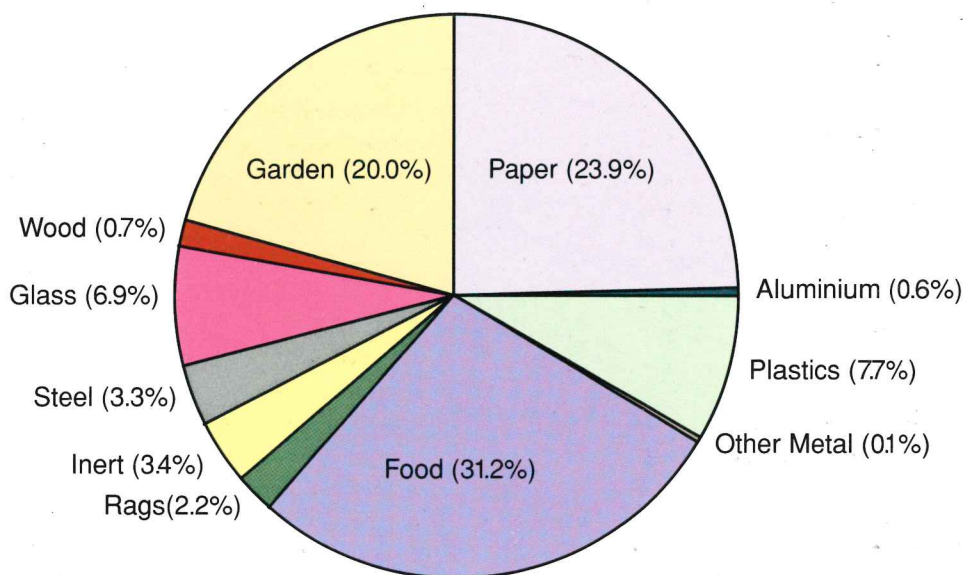
Secondly, a recent overseas study*** revealed that banning plastic packaging, including polystyrene, would have the following consequences –

Weight of alternative package	up 300%
Volume of waste	up 150%
Energy consumed	up 100%
Cost of alternative packaging	up 100%

Myth Plastics from the household are a major component of waste in landfills.

Fact Plastics are a minor component in Australian landfills. Total plastic

COMPOSITION OF DOMESTIC GARBAGE** *Presented by weight*



represents less than 8% by weight of domestic garbage**.

In addition it should be noted that domestic garbage is only about one third of the total waste going to Australian landfills. The rest is mainly industrial waste, building rubble, clean fill and other non-domestic material.

Myth Because polystyrene does not degrade it is bad for landfills.

Fact Like all plastics, polystyrene is inert and will not degrade in landfills. As a result polystyrene adds stability to landfills and does not break down to form either leachate, which may effect groundwater, or greenhouse gases such as methane which can escape into the atmosphere if not properly collected.

Myth Biodegradable materials are best for landfills.

Fact Modern landfills are designed to inhibit biodegradation so that nothing readily degrades – not polystyrene, not paper, not even waste food. Materials most commonly regarded as biodegradable do not in fact disappear in landfills. Even newspapers have been found intact and readable after decades of burial under landfills.

** Victorian EPA – Garbage Analysis Programme 1990-91.

*** German Society for Research into Packaging Market.