

Waste: Why Worry?

Australia is growing rapidly and our increased population and consumption is starting to cause a real waste problem. As a result, it has become necessary to think more critically about the items that are thrown away, and the resources required to dispose of them properly.

Each year, the average Australian produces more than 650 kg of waste, the second highest amount in the world. All rubbish from general waste bins is disposed of in landfill, but many of the materials discarded every day (such as certain plastics and metals) will take centuries to break down. As a result, there is a constant need for new landfill sites, which can have severe long-term environmental and economic consequences.



The impact of developing new landfills

From the late 1990's to the late 2000's, our waste disposal at landfills nearly doubled from 22 million tonnes to 43 million tonnes. As a result, there has been a growing need for new landfill sites to manage this waste. Today's landfills are significantly more environmentally healthy than those in the past, however these sites are still expensive to create and maintain, and may displace native animals and vegetation. This loss of habitat and biodiversity due to land clearance is one of the major reasons to extend the life of existing landfills as much as possible.

Landfill sites are also significant generators of greenhouse gases such as methane and carbon dioxide, which play a major role in climate change. There is also a risk of chemical pollution (called leachate) seeping into our water systems from poorly designed and monitored sites.



Reducing waste and saving resources

Many of the items placed in the general waste bin and taken to landfill can be reused or recycled to get the most value out of them. Recyclable materials such as paper, aluminium, glass and hard plastics are among the most commonly found items in landfill. An individual who lets their daily newspaper go to landfill will cause 350 kilograms of extra carbon dioxide to be produced each year. Creating products from recycled glass instead of new glass can prevent around 300 kgs of carbon dioxide being produced per tonne of glass, significantly reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

Reducing the amount of recyclable materials thrown away also greatly increases the life of a landfill site. Items such as aluminium cans, aerosols, plastic containers and steel tins can take over 500 years to fully break down at landfill.

