

# Need to stop talking about circular economy and start acting

MIKE.WHEELER – Inside Waste Article - 1:00pm Tuesday 26<sup>th</sup> October



Darren Thorpe is a fan of the circular economy. Having been in the industry for almost 40 years, he has seen it all, and knows that making sure Australia makes the most out of its waste in terms of reusing it, is a priority if the country wants to make the circular economy a reality.

The CEO of Australian Paper Recovery (APR) started out in the industry 1984 with his relatives being instrumental in working with the Smorgon family and helping them start their paper mill in the 1960s. Smorgon closed the paper mill in September 1989 when it sold its corrugated box factories to Visy and to Amcor.

Thorpe started his career with Smorgon as a wastepaper clerk and then progressed through to a regional buyer of material. The Smorgon business had no representation in country Victoria so that was his next port of call where he built up business in regional areas of the state.

He then continued on to Southern Wastepaper as it was called back then, until it became Visy. He started at Visy in October 1989 and worked with them for more than 12 years. He started off in regional areas and progressed to the regional sales manager and then Victoria state manager and quadrupled the profit per month from 1998 to 2000. He then took the opportunity to set up a greenfield site in WA for the company. It was designed to be set up so he could train and teach a local how to run it, with the plan being he would then return to the east coast. The first part worked out, but unfortunately, the second part didn't, which resulted in Thorpe leaving Visy.

"They advised me in May 2002 that they would bring me home but there would be no position available for me," he said. "I finished with them on May 20th, 2002, and registered Australian Paper Recovery on May 21, 2002.

“I didn’t know what I was going to do so when Visy told me, so I set up the company and decided to trade wastepaper on the export market. A lot of people knew me already from the 17.5 years in the industry. I contacted them and built a business. In the first year we turned over \$7.5 million, which was the foundation of where the business is today.”

Not one to sit back and see what happens next, he thought for his fledgling company to have longevity, it needed to have a recycling processing facility. He opened the first recycling processing facility in August 2003 in Springvale, Victoria, and from there the company has progressed to having five sites in Melbourne.

“As of today, our latest addition is our residential material recovery facility (MRF) in Truganina,” he said. “We got involved in that because the system has seen very little innovation over the years and the waste profile through the supply chain and end markets have changed so much, it was time for a processor like APR to introduce innovation into this side of the industry.”

The facility in Truganina is the only one in the state – and he believes country – that doesn’t accept glass. He is purely all about sustainable recycling in a time where end markets locally and abroad are raising the quality expectation of these recovered waste streams along with the reduction of allowable contamination into these commodities. He is also at pains to point out that he is not anti-glass. In fact, he feels the exact opposite. It’s the issues it causes when mixed with other materials that is the problem.

“Glass is very valuable resource. However, mixed in with the other recyclables, it’s a massive contaminant,” he said. “A full bottle is not a problem. It can be pulled off the line but when it breaks – either by the householder when they are putting it in the bin, or when tipped into the truck by the compactor and then compacted in the truck – it splinters. All the glass shards get into all the other recyclables and resources, such as paper, cardboard, plastic and aluminium. Plastics, such as milk bottles, detergent bottles, yoghurt and ice cream containers – all have glass shards in them that you can’t get out. The result is that you limit the end market outlets for recyclable products you can approach due to glass shards”

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This is why he is happy that soon all the councils in Victoria will have the purple-lidded, glass-only bin. He found councils are a little reluctant to come on board, and residents have been harder to persuade, but they see all the long-term advantages with regards to being able to reuse resources – ie, not just wishing for a true circular economy, but actually having one.

“Councils are beginning to realise that in order to have a circular economy, the quality of the waste material coming out of the bins has a direct impact on having ongoing outlets to receive this recovered material,” Thorpe said. “You just can’t wish cycle. Some residents in the midst of COVID last year we were putting full toilet systems in their bins. We were getting the base of lawnmowers because residents were saying ‘it’s metal, mate, you can recycle it’. The amount of wish cycling that was going on was crazy. The weirdest thing I saw online was a cow’s carcass out of Swan Valley Shire in WA. I don’t know how they managed to get it into the bin.”

Thorpe believes that not only is education important, but those residents who have been around for a while need a change in mindset. The way the waste economy works is a lot different from what it was 25 years ago.

“This is the challenge that we have,” he said. “Back in 1996, when they introduced the single-stream recycling scheme, there was not the packaging around that there is today. What we see is

that we have been able to change that; and we are now investing in new technology that will be a solution for the soft plastics coming out of the MRF, which is the biggest contaminant we are working with. We estimate that 40 per cent of our waste is soft plastics and food packaging materials. Previously, glass shards were one of the biggest landfill contaminations but we have addressed this issue over four local councils with our new MRF design.”

And what about his wish list of changes he would like to see in the industry? First, he would like to see government doing more about educating the public. Although most state governments have been advertising and promoting about how to dispose of soft plastics, he does wonder if the message is getting through.

“I followed a random load of waste from one our trucks to the landfill,” he said. “When it tipped the material out – there was 10.2 tonnes of it – visually it looked about 70 per cent, but it was probably closer to 50 per cent, was soft plastics. That is after 12 months of advertising on prime time and spending millions of dollars on educating residents to not put it in there. They are not listening. They are not accepting the change. I would find another solution.”

Like almost everybody in the waste industry, one of his biggest bugbears is a familiar one – and something that he thinks needs addressing now.

“We as a waste industry, in Victoria alone, captured taxes for the government from a landfill levy that were instigated in 1996 to be put back into the recycling industry for infrastructure and innovation,” he said. “I believe that there can be more support by the Government to redirect more investment into the industry, which is derived from this landfill levy. This is especially for privately own companies who are not as capital rich as larger corporate entities but have a huge appetite and common goal to bring innovation to support the ongoing circular economy.”

Finally, Thorpe has a different take on the single-use plastic problem. Again, it comes down to education. He believes that it is an amazing resource and feels that the easy option is to ban it. He believes industry is looking at the problem the wrong way.

“I can turn around now, take that plastic bag, send it to Malaysia and turn it into builders’ film, which is a required resource,” he said.

“We currently recycle about 800 tonnes a month of soft plastics that are pre-consumed/post-industrial that go over to Malaysia and turned into builders’ film. We import 100,000 rolls a year and have been doing that for the past 12 years as a diverse part of our business.

[APR](#) is nearly ready to announce another project to the market that introduces innovative technology where soft plastic currently going to landfill (not plastic recovered going to recycling end markets such as mentioned before) actually has an ongoing application in line with what the principals of a circular economy are supposed to be about, according to Thorpe.

It is a collective project between industry, universities and government. Same as the advances around new MRF practices to remove glass from co-mingle bins, this innovation will address renewed life for all single use plastic going to landfill, which has been a discussion point when speaking about circular economy models.

“Stay tuned for further updates coming in the next six months about this project,” said Thorpe. “The timing and opportunity are now to really reset the old mind set in the industry and start looking outside the box to embrace circular economy practices, which we can better utilise our waste as a resource and not one to use it once and bury it in the ground.”