

People power's key to solve plastic problem

Albury business sets a global example in dry-cleaning films

ELLEN
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News Focus



'IMAGINE having to walk kilometres every time you needed water; would you be so willing to leave the tap running?'

Plastic Forests managing director David Hodge put this to his nine-year-old as he explained what he does for work and why.

Ten years later, Australia's complacency towards waste is even more clear to Mr Hodge, as he leads the first company in the world dry-cleaning and recycling plastic films.

"Everything's become so easy for us, and the easiness has created a wastefulness," he said.

"People should be saying, 'Do I need this plastic thing for 10 seconds to keep my kids happy while they eat, which will then become landfill?'

"The world's production of plastic is 300 million tonnes and in the next few years that's going to increase by 40 per cent.

"We need to be looking at how to re-purpose it."

While there are "natural markets" for recycling hard plastics like milk bottles, Mr Hodge said "nobody wanted film plastics" and even less wanted films dirty with fodder or food.

And so Plastic Forests was created in 2010 to recycle

contaminated plastic films.

The business moved at the end of 2017 from Strathmerton to North Albury, where plastics from across the country are dry-cleaned, broken down, and processed into resin which is either sold or used in-house to make products such as underground cable cover and garden edging.

One of Plastic Forests' inventions is a 'mini wheel stop' to help you park in the garage, made from nearly 200 plastic bags and other mixed materials.

Mr Hodge said talks were underway with major retailers about the item.

"We make products people want to use," he said.

"The big difference with us is we don't use water.

"A normal wet-wash plant uses anywhere between 3 to 6 litres of water to clean each kilogram of plastic.

"With the technology we created, we became the first dry-cleaning plant in the world."

A 'multi-layer extruder' that once made Ford fuel tanks is among the machinery used to process resin.

The NSW EPA covered half the cost to buy the machine and have just opened the next round of \$7 million in product improvement grants.

Mr Hodge said the EPA's support had been crucial to keep up with demand as a result of China's restrictions on recycling imports.

"We started experimenting

with the distressed plastic material from China in about March last year after the ban came out in January," he said.

"It was out of control by June; everybody was in full-on panic mode as they'd hit their stockpile limits.

"That's when they started sending material to us for processing."

Mr Hodge is among those who have a solution to the plastic problem.

But what's stopping Plastic Forests' supply taking off is gaps in the end-market.

"We have one off-taker who makes builders film, but they only use about 4500 tonnes a year and there's 500,000 tonnes a year processed," Mr Hodge said.

"That's why we've been on this journey to make more products.

"And when people go to Bunnings, they need to be picking the Australian-made product that costs \$21 over the one from India that costs \$19."

Mr Hodge will be speaking at a Waste Summit about what needs to change to create a circular, rather than a linear, economy.

"There's things the government can do to help; they could make Australian products GST-free," he said.

"But the big thing is every everybody's buying choice determines an outcome.

"If everybody didn't buy the fruit wrapped in plastic, they wouldn't be sold."



SOLUTION: David Hodge is managing director of Plastic Forests, where 100 million bread bags have been recycled in four years. The company was the first globally to dry-clean plastic film. It is processed through machines, including this extruder co-funded by NSW EPA, and goes into new products. **Pictures: MARK JESSER**



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