

Environment Sustainability Recycling

Recycled milk cartons to provide houses with good bones



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What do you do with soft, used milk or juice cartons that are headed for landfill? Turn them into building products, of course.

A new recycling facility opening in Sydney's south-west on Tuesday aims to do just that. The industry-led project, a collaboration between Tetra Pak and saveBOARD, will process up to 4000 tonnes of beverage cartons, including milk and juice cartons, each year and turn them into walls or floorboards.



A new recycling plant turns drink cartons into building boards. NICK MOIR

Andrew Pooch, managing director of global food processing and packaging solutions company Tetra Pak Australia and New Zealand, said in the past few years consumers had become much more aware of packaging waste.

“People have now reached a realisation we have to do something about this. We want to take the lead in solving this issue rather than waiting for governments to tell us what to do,” he said.

The facility in Warragamba is the first of its kind in Australia. The process will involve used beverage cartons collected through the container deposit scheme. They will be chopped up, and heat and pressure will then be applied to the product so it forms a board that can be used to replace plywood, plasterboard or chipboard.

“Every company has to do something real about sustainability, not just PR and greenwashing stuff, they have to do something that people can see and touch and know it is real,” Pooch said.



The facility in Warragamba opens on Tuesday. NICK MOIR

Australia produces about 76 million tonnes of waste each year, of which more than a quarter ends up in landfill where it can leach toxins into the environment and greenhouse gasses into the atmosphere. Rather than rising to reach a target of 70 per cent by 2025, as set by the Australian Packaging Covenant Organisation in 2018, recycling rates have been stuck about 16 per cent for the past four years.

The collapse of REDcycle last year highlighted how fragile the industry is. This masthead revealed [soft plastics dropped off for recycling at supermarkets](#) had been stockpiled since 2018 after REDcycle lost the capacity to recycle the product, but had failed to inform the public. The program was suspended in November and since then, the company has been ordered to bury millions of tonnes of waste in landfill.

SaveBoard finds sustainable solutions to waste and its chief executive, Paul Charteris, said while European countries were better at recycling than Australia, there was renewed focus domestically.

“In my view the future is positive, but there will be some hard questions and some difficult conversations to get to where [we] need to be,” he said. “The world has finite resources, so instead of continuously digging them out of the ground and throwing them away, why not use them again?”

He added the industry needed ongoing investment from stakeholders – including business and state and federal governments, retailers and consumers.

NSW Minister for Environment and Heritage James Griffin said the Warragamba facility was another step forward in creating a circular economy in the state. The project received more than \$1.7 million from the NSW and federal governments.

“This first-of-its-kind facility is turning what was once considered a waste material into valuable new commodities, and helping us reduce our impact on the environment,” he said.

As the industry grapples with how to better manage to recycle, federal Environment Minister Tanya Plibersek last week flagged at a roundtable hosted by this masthead and Visy Industries that the government was prepared to regulate the plastics-recycling industry if voluntary codes failed to fix the crisis.

“We need better systems if we want to have a truly circular economy, we need laws and better systems and institutions,” she said. “And it is worth doing it.”

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