

Nation powers up battery recycling scheme

Tracey Ferrier | February 15, 2022



Batteries to be sorted for recycling at Envirostream Australia in Melbourne.



The mountain of used batteries going to landfill each year could soon become a molehill under a new national scheme to rescue the valuable resource.

The government-backed B-cycle scheme officially begins on Tuesday with the goal of dramatically boosting the recovery and reuse of often-toxic battery components.

Australia is a laggard by global standards. It recycles just 10 per cent of its waste batteries, a far cry from the 71 per cent managed by front-runner Switzerland.

The other 90 per cent wind up at the nation's dumps, where they contaminate the environment and frequently spark fires that are difficult to extinguish.

B-cycle CEO Libby Chaplin says Australia's poor recycling rate is madness when the world is so hungry for battery elements that are in limited supply: copper, cobalt, nickel, manganese and the so-called metal of the decade, lithium.

She hopes the new scheme will radically boost Australia's performance by educating consumers about what to do with spent batteries, and making it easy to get them into the recycling stream.

From Tuesday, Australians can find B-Cycle drop off points located at major chains, including Woolworths, Aldi, Bunnings and Officeworks stores in city and regional locations.

Ms Chaplin says the nation could have as many as 30,000 drop off points once the scheme has matured.

The most common types of household batteries are covered, like the ones that power remote controls, gaming handsets and fire alarms.

Button batteries will also be accepted along with easily removable batteries from larger devices such as cameras, power tools and even e-bikes. Mobile phone and computer batteries are not included because there are other established recycling programs for those.

Ms Chaplin says B-cycle, which is industry and government funded, is the first truly national push to capture and reuse waste batteries.

A levy paid by offshore battery manufacturers helps fund the scheme, generating the revenue needed to pay operators who sign up to collect, sort or process batteries.

Participants must earn B-cycle accreditation, submit to audits, and track batteries through the whole recycling journey, from collection to processing.

Ms Chaplin says having real-time data is a great strength of the scheme.

“If we find, for example, that remote areas are not participating then we can put together some strategies to target that because we really do want this to be a national scheme,” Ms Chaplin says.

Existing recycler, Melbourne-based Envirostream, is going through the accreditation phase and says opportunities for growth are vast.

“There’s about 20,000 tonnes of waste batteries generated in Australia a year at the moment but only about 2000 tonne of that is being diverted from landfill,” manager Max Lane says.

“So there’s a big upside for us if we can divert more of that ... let alone what’s coming in energy storage and electric vehicles. The first Tesla has only been on the road for 10 years so they’re just starting to come into that potential end-of-life phase.”

Ms Chaplin says the volumes of the future will come from the lithium-ion batteries that power electric vehicles and energy storage systems. She says a strategy is being developed to deal with those.

“The work we are doing now with smaller batteries is essential for laying the ground work for having a solution for those sectors into the future.”

For now, a key focus is getting Australian consumers to join the supply chain by returning waste batteries to drop-off points.

B-cycle research suggests Australians understand dead batteries have value but don’t know what to do with them and they wind up being dumped.

Clean Up Australia is not formally aligned with B-cycle but chair Pip Kiernan says it’s a relief to see a coordinated push to keep batteries out of the environment.

“I think of my father talking about batteries, and the need for product stewardship around batteries 30 years ago,” she says of her late father Ian Kiernan, who founded the environmental movement.

She concedes that influencing consumer behaviour isn’t easy but she points to the phase-out of single use shopping bags, which forced shoppers to bring their own.

“A lot of people were buying bags initially because they forgot,” she says. “But that’s changed now. They’re in your handbag, or in your car. I think the same thing will apply here (with battery drop-offs).”

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