

# Dulux paints the town green

Dulux is trialling an initiative that could see it take back one of the most tricky wastes there is – paint cans. Garth Lamb discovers new plastic pails and integrated collection plans.

Sustainability Victoria wrapped up its Paintback trial last June after collecting more than 210 tonnes of unwanted paint and packaging at one Bunnings Warehouse store in little over a year. Now a key participant in that trial, paint maker Dulux Australia, is poised to take a giant next step and play an active role in cutting the waste its customers send to landfill.

In 2004, Dulux commissioned RMIT to undertake a lifecycle analysis on various paint packaging options. It found across the board benefits in plastic containers compared with the traditional tin-plate pails, which are heavier and require significantly more energy to produce and to transport. Even with the current public fascination with sustainability, however, moving away from a tried and true solution to pursue greener options is not always simple.

“Being a signatory of the National Packaging Covenant, with any type of new packaging change... we have to evaluate the environmental impact of that,” explains Dulux sustainability specialist Rod Vockler.

“We wanted to understand the potential for recycling, not just introduce new containers and see them go straight to landfill.”

In that vein of needing to find an end-of-life solution before being able to reap the benefits of changing its packaging to plastic, two years ago Dulux approached plastics recycler Replas. It quickly found that, from a technical standpoint, recycling plastic paint pails was very viable. But that was hardly the end of the journey – after all, traditional pails are also technically recyclable. The challenge is finding a way to ensure they are actually recovered.

Not content with just switching containers, Dulux is hoping to change the whole paint marketplace, setting up collection points and a transport network to get old containers back from customers and into the recycling loop.

“It’s a full front-end to back-end pilot phase that we’re about to enter into,” says trade brands marketing manager Tim



Dulux has developed stackable plastic paint pails for cost-effective recycling.

Stevens, adding the company is still “in the early lifecycle stages” of the project.

With plastic proving a viable packaging option for water-based acrylic paints, Dulux’s initial focus will be getting everything in place to roll the new system out to its trade customers, who primarily buy 15 litre pails.

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– Tim Stevens, Dulux

“We’ve got to have a look at education of the user [and] have to have internal collection and receipting capabilities, and transportation back to point of recycling,” explains Stevens.

While Dulux is confident these “practical challenges” can be overcome, a question mark still surrounds the system’s economics – especially owing to the “tyranny of distance” issue that crops up whenever attempting to extend the

reach of a waste collection system beyond Australia’s metro centres.

Dulux can’t do much about the size of the Australian continent, but it has put a lot of effort into ensuring all the aspects it can control work from the get go.

#### On the road to recovery

“Dulux has got us involved early, which is rare. Normally we’re involved at the end, trying to figure out what to do with the waste,” says Replas director Mark Yates.

There are clearly commercial benefits for Replas in securing Dulux containers as a feedstock, although the company maintains its interest in the project is more about wanting to get in early on something it tips as a big trend for the future: companies taking greater responsibility for their wares.

Intuitively, the potential problem with recycling paint containers is contamination from residue product. According to Yates, however, so long as the bulk of the product is gone, a bit of dried paint on the container wall will not affect the recycling process, just the material’s end use.

“We’re not going to make paint pails back out of it... We target markets that



Early recycling trials showed a little paint residue was acceptable.

can handle a lot of contaminants," he says, pointing to "thick walled" products such as garden furniture or plastic signs where some paint residue or mixed polymers do not impact final quality.

Particularly in the trade market, paint buyers are generally not in the habit of forgetting to use the paint they purchased. Being able to accept some residual was important, however, so that painters are not required to rinse out old pails: environment regulators don't much like paint entering sewer systems.

Few old metal pails are recycled currently, so making it easy for customers to drop off pails will clearly help improve recovery rates. Dulux, meanwhile, could reasonably expect some marketing advantages by offering a 'green' take back service that also reduces a painter's waste disposal costs.

Through consultation with Replas, it also ensured the design of the containers will greatly simplify the reprocessor's job and improve the economics of recycling.

#### Paint it white, not black

The plastic pail's lid, handle and body are all constructed of the same polymer,

meaning the entire unit can enter the recycling stream without separation. Dulux is also factoring recyclability into its colour choice, sticking with lighter shades.

"We'd prefer the pails are white so we can use it in more products... Most materials we get are so contaminated they can only be used in black [products], which is a limited range," says Yates.

Another design feature that will greatly increase recovery is stackability of the empty pails, meaning they take up much less space than traditional containers, both in storage at the collection centres and in transit once the take back and collection networks are in place.

"We can ship around a tonne in one pallet space – that makes it economical to bring the plastic from most

places in Australia [back to Melbourne]," says Yates.

Dulux is currently gearing up to launch a full pilot program, expected to run for 3-4 months, that will better quantify the economics and identify any additional barriers, although Stevens says "we think we've got a pretty good idea of the things we're up against".

"Painter education, in-store operational handling and the collection and return back to the point of recycling – those three aspects are top of mind.

"[But] when you have a look at the lifecycle analysis, when you go back to fundamentals... it makes good environmental and good economic sense to move to plastic."

If those fundamentals hold true once the final system kinks are ironed out, it's a fair bet the rest of the industry won't take long to follow the Dulux lead. And the sort of fundamental change that brings to the local paint market could set an example of extended producer responsibility other manufacturers can follow too.

More at [www.dulux.com.au](http://www.dulux.com.au) and [www.corporaterecycling.com.au](http://www.corporaterecycling.com.au)

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