



Mark Speakman
Minister for the Environment
Minister for Heritage
Assistant Minister for Planning

MEDIA RELEASE

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MEM STATEMENT - NSW LEADS ON TIGHTER AIR QUALITY STANDARDS AND REDUCING PLASTICS IN THE ENVIRONMENT

NSW Environment Minister Mark Speakman has welcomed the outcomes of today's Meeting of Environment Ministers (MEM) in Melbourne, including jurisdictions approving key NSW-led initiatives with respect to air quality, microbeads and plastic bags.

Mr Speakman said that NSW had led a national review of particulate emissions standards since 2012 and Ministers today unanimously agreed on reporting standards for annual average and 24-hour PM_{2.5} and PM₁₀ emissions.

"PM_{2.5} (fine particles) and PM₁₀ (coarse particles) are the categories of particulate matter most associated with vehicle and diesel emissions, industry, wood fire heaters and natural events such as bushfires and dust storms," he said.

"Exposure to PM_{2.5} is linked with mortality, morbidity and cancer. There's also evidence that the health effects associated with PM₁₀ exposure are independent of the health effects associated with PM_{2.5}. That's why we're tackling both emissions types.

"We're setting the bar high, too. The NSW-led standards for the especially dangerous PM_{2.5} emissions appear to be the toughest in the world. The PM₁₀ standards are tougher than most other developed economies, including the EU, Canada and most of the USA."

Following a commitment made at the February 2015 MEM to reduce the impact of microbeads on marine environments, Ministers also agreed that NSW and the Commonwealth would lead further work to secure a voluntary agreement from industry to phase out microbeads in personal care, cosmetic and cleaning products over two years from no later than 1 July 2016. It was also agreed that further actions in this regard would be considered if required.

"We're so fortunate to enjoy rich aquatic ecosystems in Australia, and yet personal care products can cause significant damage to our marine life, and scientists are also worried that this may have implications further up the food chain," Mr Speakman said. "That's why it's important to act now."

The MEM also endorsed NSW's recommendation to establish a ministerial roundtable to address the environmental impacts of plastic bags. The roundtable will be hosted by the NSW and Queensland Governments at Taronga Zoo on 29 February 2016 and consider a discussion paper that will canvass feasible and effective responses to the impacts of single use plastic shopping bags.

The roundtable will include ministerial representatives from other jurisdictions as well as scientific experts and representatives from business and environmental groups.