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Australia continues to be the world leader in recycling its old newspapers with a record national average in 2004 of 74.5 per cent, an increase of one per cent over the previous year, according to the latest research produced for the Publishers National Environment Bureau by the News Limited Environmental Secretariat.

Keen community involvement in kerbside recycling and enthusiastic support by publishers nationally gave this world-class result, said PNEB executive Director Frank Kelett.

“As has happened in the USA, Australia’s newspaper recycling figures have reached a plateau and the challenge now is to maintain that momentum,” said Mr Kelett.

He said about seven per cent of old newspapers were used around the house as drop sheets for painting, lighting fires or as weed mats in gardens and were therefore unrecoverable. The 2004 figures meant that Australia was recycling over 80 per cent of the available 93 per cent of newspapers, said Mr Kelett.

“It is unrealistic to think we can take our rate of recycling newspapers much higher but the focus is to keep people enthusiastic about recycling,” said Mr Kelett.

In 2004, Australia recycled 772,151 tonnes of newsprint compared to 718,482 in 2003.

Newsprint used in Australia now includes between 20 to 55 per cent recycled material. In 2004, 97,654 tonnes of old newspapers and 61,794 tonnes of magazines were de-inked at the Norske Skog mill in Albury before being turned into new newsprint.

Recycled newspapers are also made into cardboard and other uses including home insulation and papier mache – all egg cartons are made out of 100 per cent recycled newspapers.

Mr Kelett said the growth in recycling rates in 2004 was even more significant when the increase in newsprint over the year was taken into account. Despite circulation overall remaining flat, an increase in pagination in 2004 due to the healthy advertising climate meant an extra 53,670 tonnes, or 7.5 per cent, of newsprint was used over 2003.

News Limited Environmental Secretariat manager, Dr Tony Wilkins, said Australia's success was also built on a kerbside collection system second to none. But, he said, Australia could not afford to become complacent and urged councils not to ditch the separate containers for newspapers, bottles and other recyclables in favour of mixed containers.

Exports of old newspapers grew by almost a third in 2004, up from 142,368 to 190,757 tonnes between 2003 and 2004, mainly to the Asian market. However there was concern from buyers in China about the contamination of the newspapers by other rubbish.

"We need to convince the councils and governments that they have to stick with simple, cost-effective systems of collecting recyclable garbage, with separate containers in the home and kerbside to reduce contamination," said Dr Wilkins. "People can't just wrap their prawn heads in newspaper and throw them in with the newspaper recycling."

Victoria was the best state at recycling with a rate of 80.3 per cent or 208,870 tonnes, an increase over the 2003 figure of 77 per cent or 181,519 tonnes. The other states and territories were as follows:

- NSW 77.7 per cent or 247,821 tonnes (2003: 77 per cent or 248,253 tonnes)
- ACT 72.5 per cent or 15,313 tonnes (2003: 74.6 per cent or 18,280 tonnes)
- Queensland 69 per cent or 132,581 tonnes (2003: 68.3 or 116,175 tonnes)
- Western Australia 68.6 per cent or 98,544 tonnes (2003: 70.6 per cent or 92,511 tonnes)
- South Australia 66.4 per cent or 54,108 tonnes (2003: 65 per cent or 48,321 tonnes)
- Tasmania 64.5 per cent or 12,865 tonnes (2003: 64.8 per cent or 11,415 tonnes)
- Northern Territory 19.5 per cent or 2,049 tonnes (2003: 19.9 per cent or 2,008 tonnes)