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Recycling illusion exposed

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THE amount of paper and glass packaging being recycled by Australians has been seriously overestimated, a confidential leaked audit of a national recycling report sent to federal and state ministers has found.

The draft audit shows figures recorded from the leading packaging company, Visy Industries, included glass recycled from New Zealand, which bolstered the Australian result by almost 70,000 tonnes.

The report also took figures from Visy and another company, Amcor, that confused newspaper and office paper recycling with cardboard and carton packaging, boosting the figure by almost 300,000 tonnes.

The draft audit reveals a crisis in how recycling is measured and suggests Australia will not reach its target of recycling 65 per cent of consumer packaging by 2010.

Restaurants were increasingly using waste contractors, who found dumping the glass in landfill cheaper than recycling it, said a source connected to the National Packaging Covenant Council, the government and industry body that manages the environmental effects of packaging.

Revised figures show the worst recycling rates are for glass and plastic. It says about a third of bottles and other containers are being reused. Those figures do not include South Australia, which recycles more glass and offers a deposit for returning used bottles, and may not include imported wine bottles.

The audit raises serious questions about how recycling is measured for the National Packaging Covenant Council, which includes all the big retail and packaging companies, such as Coles, Woolworths, Coca-Cola Amatil and Foster's.

The consultancy MS2, which compiled the original report, said there was debate about whether the draft audit, produced by another independent consultancy, Pitcher Partners, should be adopted, and said it doubted the reliability of the new figures.

This year is the crunch year for the National Packaging Covenant, with a mid-term review under way and state and federal ministers to meet next week to discuss recycling rates and phasing out plastic shopping bags.

The federal Minister for the Environment, Peter Garrett, is expected to be pressured by environmentalists to support legislation for deposits on glass and plastic bottles.

Industry representatives said the inflated results were supplied by mistake and would be corrected, and that recycling figures continued to rise. The target figure of 65 per cent by 2010 was still within reach, they said.

"The covenant and the council have already agreed to amend the data," said a spokesman for the National Packaging Covenant Council, Russell Peel. "I don't believe the alterations are serious, or undermine the improving recycling performance."

But a source connected to the council said it had been happy to keep up the appearance of continual improvement, when

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the figures were not so rosy.

"The system is not working," the source said. "The ministers have to face reality. The 65 per cent recycling target won't be reached. I think they have been negligent in not properly checking the figures because they were happy with the nice figures."

The official report for 2006 put the national recycling rate at 56 per cent but the new adjusted figures put the rate at 48 per cent, with the qualification that confidence even in this figure is low. The audit shows confidence in the figures on recycling is less than one-third of best practice.

The Federal Government has hinted that stronger measures could be brought against the packaging industry if the voluntary system fails.

The most successful recycling effort has been for aluminum cans, because they are seen as more valuable to the companies. But glass recycling is facing mounting problems because of breakages in the recycling process and because many beverages are consumed away from home.

A spokesman for Visy Industries, Lee Smith, said new sorting technologies, which could better separate small fragments of broken glass from other waste, had improved recycling in the past year. "We believe we are on track to meet our targets," he said.

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2008/04/06/1207420200977.html>