

QMC Publications presents:

# PLASTIC: EXPOSED.

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## A super-sized plastic problem

A selection of plastic-packaged goods from supermarkets. Photo courtesy: The Spinoff

**Plastic is everywhere. In our homes, on the roads, in offices, and even on construction sites. And, of course, around our food. Plastic is being thrown out every second of our lives globally- every minute a truckload of plastic waste enters the ocean! Yet even with these staggering statistics for evidence, many large supermarket chains, such as New World and Countdown, are not doing much about it and communities are suffering by being forced to buy plastic-covered food. They may have banned plastic bags, but what about the single-use plastic that envelops our weekly shop?**

*Recycling one plastic bottle would save enough energy to power a 60-watt lightbulb for 3 hours. Photo Courtesy: The Guardian*



Plastic is a huge problem that is an issue worldwide. New Zealand supermarket chains are introducing new alternatives and campaigns to combat plastic on their shelves. Both Countdown and Foodstuffs, along with local New Zealand businesses (Amcor, Unilever, Nestle, PepsiCo, The Coca-Cola Company, Mars and Danone), some of which supply products that they sell, have signed the New Zealand Plastic Packaging Declaration, a document stating that companies will be using 100% recyclable, reusable or compostable packaging (instead of plastic) around their products by 2025. But is that too late?

Kiri Hannifin, General Manager Corporate Affairs, Safety and Sustainability at Countdown and Ella Marelich, Corporate Affairs Coordinator at Foodstuffs, both responded to questions regarding plastic packaging.

When asked about what their companies have done to reduce unnecessary packaging, Kiri stated that so far Countdown has “phased out single-use plastic carrier bags (we were the first supermarket to do this), we no longer sell single-use plastic straws, we’ve removed more than 150 tonnes of plastic from our produce section, all our meat trays, hard plastic packaging in bakery, own brand milk bottles, water bottles, a growing number of packaging items in produce, and even biscuit trays are made from recycled plastic and can then be recycled. We’re also working to phase out hard-to-recycle plastics like PVC.”

On the other hand, Ella said that “We work closely with the businesses who supply to our stores and encourage them to remove any unnecessary packaging and switch to reusable, recyclable or compostable options where packaging is needed. Our stores are actively looking at ways to reduce plastic packaging behind the scenes, eliminating excess plastic where possible.” Ella also supplied information on New World’s progress in sustainability since June 2020.

Notable points are the June 2020 accomplishment of rPET containers for all Pams fruit and vegetables, the 2017 1<sup>st</sup> of July accomplishment of zero microbeads on the shelves 1 year before their ban and the 2019 1<sup>st</sup> of June introduction of the ‘Bring your Own Container’ campaign in the seafood, deli, butchery and bakery departments (New World was the first major supermarket to do this).

Another issue we asked Kiri and Ella about was the disposal of plastic-packaged out-of-date products. Kiri said that “in situations where we do need to use plastic (to keep products safe to eat, protected during transport and fresh) we’re working to find better alternatives like reusable and recyclable options.” Ella stated that “Much of our plastic-packaged food is recyclable including our meat trays, cardboard boxes and fruit and veg punnets. We recycle these in store and compost any food waste we have.”

Despite many supermarkets’ efforts, the plastic problem is still raging. According to Plastics New Zealand, every New Zealander uses around 31 kgs of plastic packaging each year, but only recycles 5.58 kgs- even though 97% of New Zealanders have access to places for recycling plastics 1 and 2 (and some 1-7). These outrageous statistics need to be changed. Although people know they can recycle some plastic types, hardly any actually take the time to put it in the recycling bin.

So, how do we change our predicted future of a plastic-filled world? The answer is: mycelium packaging. Mycelium packaging is made up of the precursor of fungi, mycelium, which is light, easy to mould and undemanding to produce. This makes it an obvious choice for sustainable packaging.

Mycelium binds material together- in the instance of mycelium packaging, agricultural plant waste and mycelium are bound together, creating a product that is a nutrient not a pollutant, takes less water and electricity to make than plastic and is more than a replacement to Styrofoam and plastic packaging. It requires only one-eighth to one-fifth of the energy used to produce the equivalent amount of foam plastic.

Although plastic in the supermarket industry is a big problem, we can still do something about it. So make a change to our world and save our planet. Now.

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