Submission No 733

INQUIRY INTO PROPOSED ENERGY FROM WASTE FACILITIES

Name: Name suppressed

Date Received: 28 October 2025

Partially Confidential

Submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Energy from Waste (EfW) in Australia

From: ,
Date: 28th October 2025

Summary of Key Points

- As a , I am concerned about the **mental health, psychosocial, and behavioural impacts** of Energy-from-Waste (EfW) incineration on individuals and communities.
- EfW projects generate **chronic community stress, perceived health risks, and feelings of powerlessness** that contribute to poorer mental health outcomes.
- The **Parkes Energy Recovery Facility** (NSW) exemplifies these concerns—illustrating how regional siting decisions, perceived injustice, and lack of transparency can harm community wellbeing.
- EfW development risks **reinforcing environmental inequality** by locating polluting or controversial facilities in lower-income or regional areas.
- Framing waste as an "energy source" undermines behavioural motivation for **waste reduction, reuse, and recycling**, which are crucial both for environmental and mental wellbeing.
- Waste policy should explicitly integrate **psychological wellbeing, trust, and social justice metrics** into all EfW decision-making and assessment processes.

About the Author

I am a with experience in public and private health sectors. I am currently working as a in private practice in Parkes, NSW. I write from a professional and evidence-based perspective on the psychosocial and public health implications of EfW technologies.

---

1. Psychological and Social Dimensions of Energy from Waste

While EfW is often assessed through environmental and economic lenses, the **psychological and social dimensions** of such infrastructure are seldom examined. Evidence from environmental and health psychology demonstrates that **perceived exposure to environmental hazards**, particularly those associated with pollution or waste, can trigger persistent stress and anxiety in affected populations—even when measured emissions are within regulatory limits.

Residents near proposed or operating incinerators commonly report:

- **Chronic worry and perceived health threat** ("toxic anxiety");
- **Sleep disturbance and vigilance behaviours**;
- **Loss of trust in public institutions** when consultation feels tokenistic;
- **Fractured community cohesion** due to conflict over project legitimacy.

These experiences are not trivial. Prolonged psychosocial stress is associated with poorer cardiovascular, immune, and mental health outcomes.

---

2. Case Example: Parkes Energy Recovery Facility (NSW)

The **proposed Parkes Energy Recovery Facility**, located within the Parkes Special Activation Precinct in regional NSW, provides a useful example of the psychosocial challenges associated with EfW developments.

- The project proposes to process approximately **600,000 tonnes of residual waste per year**, transported by rail from Sydney and other regions, generating around **60 megawatts** of electricity.
- Although proponents highlight technological safety and energy recovery benefits, local residents and farming groups have expressed strong concerns about **air quality, ash disposal, odour, visual impact, and water use** (ABC News, 2025).
- Local advocacy groups, such as the **Parkes Clean Future Alliance**, report **psychological strain** among residents stemming from uncertainty, lack of trust in consultation processes, and perceptions of regional inequity (parkescleanfuture.org).
- Community stress has been intensified by the perception that **metropolitan areas are shielded from EfW projects**, while regional communities are asked to host them.

From a clinical and health psychology standpoint, such patterns are consistent with well-documented phenomena of **environmental injustice**, **place-based distress**, and **learned helplessness**—conditions that can erode both individual mental health and collective resilience.

---

3. Environmental Inequality and Health Justice

EfW facilities are often located in areas with **lower socioeconomic power** and **less political agency**, a pattern seen internationally and increasingly within Australia.

This inequitable siting compounds existing health disparities by adding **environmental and psychological burdens** to already vulnerable populations.

Research in health psychology consistently shows that **perceived injustice** and **lack of control** are potent predictors of anxiety, depressive symptoms, and reduced wellbeing. These are not merely abstract concerns; they translate into measurable differences in **mental health service demand, medication use, and self-reported wellbeing** in affected communities.

The Parkes example underscores the need for a **"Health and Wellbeing in All Policies"** approach to waste infrastructure, in line with the World Health Organization's recommendations.

---

4. Behavioural and Cultural Impacts on Sustainability

From a behavioural psychology perspective, the way EfW is framed has profound implications for public attitudes and actions.

- Presenting waste as a "renewable energy source" risks **normalising high waste generation**, reducing intrinsic motivation to reduce or reuse.
- **Community-based recycling, repair, and composting programs**—which offer visible, participatory experiences—are more effective in sustaining pro-environmental norms and delivering wellbeing benefits.
- By contrast, large-scale incineration is **psychologically distant**, offering little opportunity for community engagement or behavioural ownership.

This shift in perception can undermine Australia's transition to a **circular economy** and reduce the social and psychological benefits of local sustainability action.

---

5. Recommendations

To protect mental health and community wellbeing, I recommend the following policy measures for consideration:

1. **Integrate psychosocial and wellbeing assessments** into all Environmental and Health Impact Assessments for EfW facilities, using established public-health frameworks.
2. **Mandate transparent, participatory decision-making**, ensuring affected communities (including regional and Indigenous groups) have genuine influence.
3. **Establish wellbeing and trust indicators** as part of ongoing community monitoring for any approved facility.

4. **Commission longitudinal research** on the mental health, behavioural, and social impacts of living near EfW facilities—including projects such as Parkes.
5. **Prioritise waste prevention and reuse initiatives** that build community engagement and psychological ownership of sustainability.
6. **Conduct an environmental justice audit** of EfW siting patterns to ensure equitable distribution of environmental burdens.
7. **Reframe EfW policy** to focus on human and planetary health, rather than solely energy generation metrics.

---

6. Conclusion

Energy from Waste must be evaluated not only for its technical performance, but for its **human consequences**.
From a clinical and health psychology standpoint, the evidence is clear: EfW projects can create **psychological distress, environmental injustice, and behavioural complacency**, especially when imposed on regional or disadvantaged communities.

The Parkes proposal exemplifies these challenges. To achieve genuinely sustainable waste policy, decision-makers must integrate **mental health, community wellbeing, and public trust** as central metrics of success—not peripheral considerations.
