

Press Release Natural Turf Alliance

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STOKES SYNTHETIC FIELDS REPORT A MISSED OPPORTUNITY TO PROTECT SYDNEY FROM A SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL MENACE

The NSW Government has a responsibility to ensure the community has access to quality playing fields that are accessible to the whole community, represent taxpayer value for money and do not result in major environmental damage.

Minister for Planning and Open Spaces Rob Stokes today released a report into the contentious issue of synthetic turf (See link here: <https://www.planning.nsw.gov.au/Policy-and-Legislation/Open-space-and-parklands/Synthetic-Turf-Study>). However, the Natural Turf Alliance (NTA) a grassroots movement giving voice to a growing community opposition across Sydney, believes more action is needed.

“The report does not achieve the urgent and necessary changes that hundreds of people called for in their submissions to the inquiry” says NTA spokesperson Garnet Brownbill.

“Most disappointing is the lack of requirement for a DA to be mandatory for every new synthetic installation so that environmental impacts are properly assessed. This is surprising given that this was voiced by so many groups involved in the workshops”.

There are far more economical alternatives to synthetics that community groups are calling for – New Generation natural turf fields that rely on modern grass cultivars and soil science to provide increased usage soccer clubs require. These fields have been built in Sydney over the past 8 years but the report ignored these examples, calling them “unproven” with no evidence to back the claim.

It also consistently holds up hope for unproven 4G synthetic turf and downplays improvements from New Generation natural turf.

The report points to advances in 4G and cork infill synthetic fields being more environmentally friendly but fails to provide any evidence to back this claim - comprehensively failing to address microplastics from the degradation of the plastic yarn and heating impacts.

“Natural turf fields play a critical role in cooling cities while even the newest synthetic fields act as urban heat islands that increase carbon emissions and produce tonnes of non-recyclable plastic waste”, said Mr Brownbill.

“Councils will continue to increase their carbon footprint by converting numerous fields in their LGA’s which are too hot to use in the summer and limit access for families, children and locals with genuine open green space.”

Specifically, the NTA calls on the NSW Government to:

- 1. Require DA’s for all new synthetic fields so that environmental impacts can be adequately assessed.**
- 2. End NSW Government Grants for councils that tie local oval upgrades to synthetic ovals over modern natural turf alternatives.**

3. **No longer include synthetic ovals in targets for increasing open green space.**
4. **Limit the number of synthetic fields installed in LGAs due to climate implications of cumulative synthetic fields.**
5. **Force Councils who have installed synthetic fields with rubber-tyre infills to retrofit them with filters that stop plastic pollution currently entering Sydney's waterways.**
6. **Commit to an Australian study into impacts of synthetic fields so that policy making is led by science rather than strategy documents produced by the synthetic turf industry.**

"Allowing councils to keep on converting their ovals contradicts the NSW Government's "Greening our City" targets, its various urban cooling initiatives, not to mention Minister Kean's "plastics plan and waste strategy" added Garnet Brownbill.

Reining in the spread would be a very good start if NSW is to be a leader in protecting our environment, reducing waste and maximising recycling".

MEDIA ENQUIRIES: GARNET BROWNBILL 0415 332 932

*The Natural Turf Alliance is a recently formed group made up of the following community and environmental networks:

Members of Natural Turf Alliance

Friends of Berowra Valley
Friends of Gardiner Park Alliance
Friends of Ku-ring-gai Environment (FOKE)
Friends of Lane Cove National Park
Friends of Norman Griffiths Oval
Greenwich Community Association
Lane Cove Bushland and Conservation Society
Mosman Parks and Bushland Association
Natural Grass at Bob Campbell Inc
Ryde-Hunters Hill Flora and Fauna Preservation Society Inc
STEP Inc
Sustaining Gladesville Reserve Inc
West Pennant Hills Valley Progress Association
Willoughby Environmental Protection Association

REINING IN SYNTHETIC FIELDS- A WHOLE OF SYDNEY SOLUTION

1. Require DA's for all new synthetic fields so that environmental impacts can be adequately assessed.

- Councils are currently assessing and signing off on synthetic upgrades without having to undertake independent assessments of impacts, a huge source of anger to the community.
- In the Ku-ring-gai and Hornsby LGAs, ovals such as Norman Griffiths Oval, Warrimoo Oval and Hornsby Park are surrounded by critically endangered bushland and adjoin National Parks. Yet ovals can be installed without comprehensive studies into impacts on waterways, birdlife, and surrounding ecosystems.

2. End NSW Government Grants to councils that tie local oval upgrades to synthetic projects over modern natural turf alternatives.

- There are numerous examples around Sydney where "tied grants" have influenced decisions by cash-strapped councils, leading to rushed and inadequate environmental studies into the impacts of synthetics.
- There is still no incentive for Councils to investigate alternative solutions such as Mosman Council's new modern turf oval at Middle Head Oval which provides 49-55 hours/week of playⁱ. These ovals use developments in soil science and hydrology to increase usage without the adverse impacts of synthetics.

3. Do not include synthetic ovals in targets for increasing 'open green space'.

- The recent Sydney lockdown has shown the importance of genuine green space. By contrast, the synthetic fields which replace them cannot be used for dog walking and passive recreation. They effectively close off green spaces for general public use. Very often, heat also renders them unusable in summer.
- The huge opposition to the conversion of Bob Campbell Oval in Lane Cove is because green space that has been cherished for generations will no longer be able to support the community's annual fair and picnic or passive recreation.

4. Limit the number of synthetic fields installed in LGAs due to climate and usage implications of cumulative synthetic fields.

- Natural turf fields play a critical role in cooling cities while synthetic fields act as urban heat islands that increase carbon emissions and produce tonnes of plastic waste that is currently non-recyclable.ⁱⁱ
- It's policy changes like this that the recent IPCC report shows are critically important in combatting climate change, including considering future impacts of increased heat, flood and fire events.

5. Councils who have installed synthetic fields with rubber-tyre infills must retrofit them with filters to save waterways.

- The NSW Environment Protection Authority has clearly demonstrated an increase of microplastics in waterways close to synthetic ovals, including migrating infill and plastic grass especially after rain.ⁱⁱⁱ Despite the known harms, there is also no ban on rubber crumb being used on synthetic ovals.
- Councils should be made to clean up the mess they are making to local creeks and waterways.

6. Commit to an Australian study into impacts of synthetic fields so that policy making is led by science.

- To date, there is no comprehensive study comparing synthetic ovals to modern turf ovals with regards to environmental, social, and economic impacts.
- Far too many councils are basing their decision making on strategy documents co-written by synthetic turf industry.

ⁱ See the NSW EPA funded video on New Generation natural turf ovals here:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4gDs9Z4kQME>

ⁱⁱ Total life cycle emissions for a standard FIFA sized pitch are estimated to be around 1500 tonnes CO₂e
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/350886618_Literature_Review_on_environmental_and_health_impacts_of_synthetic_turf.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.northernbeachesreview.com.au/story/7326689/study-shows-rising-tide-of-microplastics-in-lagoon/>