



**Product  
Stewardship  
Centre of  
Excellence**

**CASE  
STUDY**



# Rip Curl Wetsuit Take-Back Recycling Program

In May 2021, Rip Curl announced the introduction of a wetsuit take back recycling program, a first in Australia. The take-back recycling program offers an end-of-life solution for an iconic but difficult to recycle product: neoprene wetsuits. Developed in partnership with TerraCycle, the program accepts wetsuits from any surf brand at select Rip Curl stores across Australia (in VIC, NSW, QLD and WA) or via post. Under the current program, booties, gloves, hoods and diving suits are not accepted.

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## A BIT ABOUT WETSUITS

A synthetic rubber, neoprene is used in wetsuits because it is a flexible material that provides, amongst other things, insulation from chilly waters and its ability to be stretched reduces paddle fatigue. However, due to a range of factors including damage from UV rays, sunscreens and salt water, as well as normal wear-and-tear, the neoprene foam begins to deteriorate over time, seams start to leak and the neoprene starts to lose effectiveness. This leads many surfers to replace their wetsuit on a regular, if not yearly, basis.

This also leaves surfers with the dilemma of what to do with their old and/or damaged wetsuits. Rip Curl has a stated core value of Community and Environment, which inspired the brand to find a solution to address the waste stream created from wetsuits.

## RECYCLING NEOPRENE

Not only is neoprene a non-renewable material that is energy-intensive to manufacture, it is also difficult to recycle<sup>1</sup>. This led to a partnership with TerraCycle to develop a solution possible for this waste stream.

Rather than turning old wetsuits into raw neoprene for making new wetsuits, the recycled neoprene recovered from the Rip Curl program is shredded and turned into the safety attenuation layer of soft fall matting used in playgrounds and outdoor gyms.

Finding innovative ways to keep products and materials in use is a challenge that is not unique to Rip Curl. Businesses across a range of sectors are working to find new markets and develop the best possible use for their recycled materials.

More broadly, the industry is also experimenting with substituting petroleum-based neoprene with plant-based wetsuit rubber materials, a trend that is likely to continue. For example, Rip Curl's "Made with Sustainability in Mind" line of wetsuits are made with recycled jersey materials and 50% plant-based, neoprene-free foam that has

been certified as 50% Biobased by the United States Department of Agriculture. These are positive developments, however these products will also need to be responsibly managed at end of life.

## PARTNERING TO FACILITATE PRODUCT STEWARDSHIP

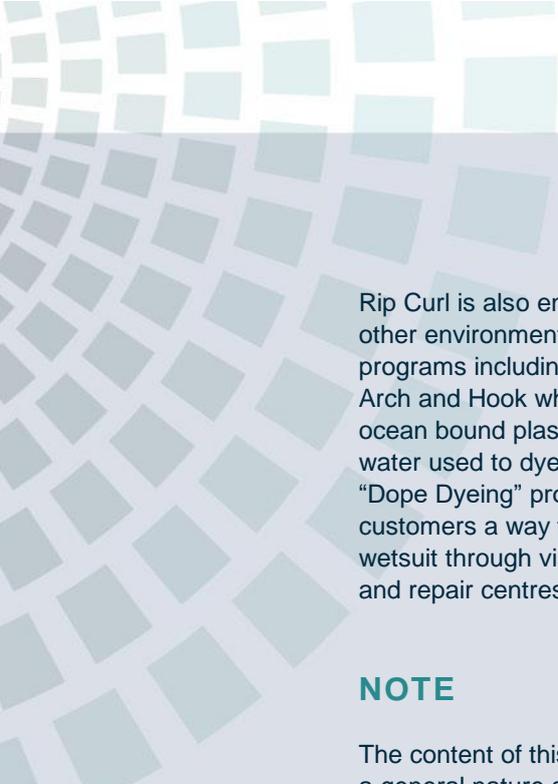
Designing a product take-back program can be a daunting process that requires a considerable upfront investment of time and resources. Through partnering with TerraCycle, Rip Curl gained support from and access to TerraCycle's recycling capabilities and experience. This is of particular importance when working to develop a recycling solution for difficult products and/or a business that does not have in-house recycling capabilities. TerraCycle, an international recycling company operating in 21 countries, specialises in hard-to-recycle waste<sup>2</sup>. TerraCycle programs are funded by company partners (including brands, manufacturers and retailers) which makes these programs free for consumers.

## THE POWER OF A PILOT PROGRAM

The implementation of a pilot program in April 2018 at the Rip Curl Flagship Store in Torquay, Victoria provided Rip Curl with the opportunity to test demand for a recycling program. The pilot reaffirmed the desire of consumers to have a better option to dispose of their unused wetsuits in a way that is more environmentally friendly.

## NEXT STEPS

Looking to the future, according to Shasta O'Loughlin, Rip Curl Environmental, Social and Governance Manager, the plan is to expand beyond Australia: "once the program has proven itself here at home, we are excited to explore a global expansion. We want to give all surfers the opportunity to recycle their old wetsuits<sup>3</sup>."



Rip Curl is also engaging with a number of other environmental and sustainability programs including using wetsuit hangers by Arch and Hook which are made from recycled ocean bound plastic, reducing the amount of water used to dye wetsuit foam through their “Dope Dyeing” process, and offering customers a way to extend the life of their wetsuit through visiting one of their service and repair centres around the world.

## NOTE

The content of this case study is information of a general nature sourced from public sources and investigations conducted by the Product Stewardship Centre of Excellence. It does not represent advice, direction or endorsement from the Product Stewardship Centre of Excellence, nor does it represent the only method or practice to address the topics laid out in this document. Individuals or organisations are encouraged to conduct their own analysis and consideration of strategic options relevant to their situation before taking action in regards to the matters covered.

Cover image supplied by Rip Curl Australia.

## REFERENCES

1 [HTTPS://SRFACE.COM/KNOWLEDGE-BASE/WETSUIT-NEOPRENE/](https://srface.com/knowledge-base/wetsuit-neoprene/)

2 [HTTPS://WWW.TERRACYCLE.COM/EN-AU](https://www.terracycle.com/en-au)

3 [HTTPS://WWW.RIPCURL.COM/AU/BLOG/AUSTRALIAS-FIRST-WETSUIT-TAKE-BACK-RECYCLING-PROGRAM.HTML](https://www.ripcurl.com/au/blog/australias-first-wetsuit-take-back-recycling-program.html)

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