

My context

My interest in writing a submission is in the recyclability of worksite footwear. I used to be a tradie, and still have a preference for work boots as casual wear. I write as a consumer.

Having had two pairs of work boots from two very reputable brands disintegrate in the first 3 months of 2025, I got online to find out why they disintegrate, and how to dispose of them properly.

As a result I have started asking questions about the materials used given different consumer purposes for work boots, as well as the avenues of communication used to make consumers aware of place-based opportunities for engaging with the circular economy.

The product and materials; consumer uses and expectations

Both my pairs of boots were in excellent, almost unused condition when, lo and behold, the midsoles disintegrated whilst out walking. This, I learnt on YouTube, is due to hydrolysis, a process hastened when shoes with Polyurethane (PU) midsoles are stored in people's closets rather than being used on daily basis as by a tradesperson.

Used daily by tradespeople, these work boots can last extremely well and often draw adulation online for a favourite brand. However, many customers report buying popular brands of elastic-sided work boots for sporadic home gardening or very occasional bush walking. These consumers are in a minor furore online because they had no idea that their boots' PU midsole would disintegrate in the closet.¹

I think the online furore from home gardeners and occasional bush walkers is fair. There seems to be scope for either better customer information, or alternative product construction for brands that advertise their items here or overseas as casual wear.²

Tradespeople report online (eg, YouTube comments) having multiple pairs of boots in rotation, and compare quite various longevity even from the same brand and when used in the same industry. It is clear that there are a lot of work boots in use which will need to be disposed of at some time. It is generally agreed that boots with a PU midsole are not repairable once the midsole has disintegrated or become exposed as the outer sole wears through.

Awareness, accessibility and applicability of the circular economy

To the best of my knowledge, all the most respected work boot brands use a PU midsole and are Australian owned,³ making resource recovery feasible at a policy level. In a context where governments are trying to incentivise apprenticeships, solve labour shortages in the construction industry, and smooth the pathway for housing construction we really need to be looking at the resulting needs in the circular economy.

There was a boot recycling trial in Victoria in 2022 with drop-off in metro and regional areas and a better coverage than other shoe recycling programmes; the trial is currently under review.⁴ One

boot manufacturer states on their website that they assisted with drawing competitors in to this trial.⁵ It seems promising that market competitors are willing to join together.

Access to casual and sports shoe recycling looks patchy and uneven even in metropolitan areas, and looks totally lacking in regional and country areas. It's also important that online maps be kept up-to-date to facilitate fluid customer use of these drop-off facilities. (I haven't fact checked any map locations, nor when they were last updated, nor who is responsible for this.) These websites expressly state that they will not take work boots.⁶ I had assumed that unknown chemical contaminants on work boots poses a problem for both OH&S and resource re-use, yet I read that one chain store allows donation of work boots, but only for customers making a purchase;⁷ and yet some material re-uses have been called into question, leaving me with yet another consumer quandary.⁸

As a consumer, I would like better information on products and real-world recycling. It seems like a touch of greenwashing for a business to claim online that they use materials which are recyclable yet in reality aren't going to be recycled. It's all very well, for instance, to say a PU midsole is recyclable and therefore better for the environment than PVC, but shoes with PU midsoles are not repairable as a traditional sole is and thus have a shorter life, and work boots seem to be largely ineligible for recycling in the circular economy. And then I read that some PVC footwear is being recycled, yet by a manufacturer with an otherwise less than stellar ethical rating.⁹ So, which is *in practice* a more ecologically ethical item? As a consumer I just don't know. I don't want a scientific answer, I want a what-happens-in-the-real-world-within-ten-minutes-drive-of-my-home answer.

Until my second pair of disintegrated boots motivated me to look, I was unaware of all options for recycling footwear, although there are several recycling points close to me. I was able to find out online about recycling drop-off points since I knew the expression "circular economy" from radio programmes. Some information was easy to find, but some took more time than reasonable for a busy person wanting to do the right thing. I wonder what use is being made of all types of media and advertising to make consumers aware beyond point of sale? Given my shopping habits, neither advertising at point of sale nor on social media will reach me. Is advertising placed in gyms or sports clubs or op shop chains in close proximity to drop-off points? Are there sports figures from the major leagues or online influencers who are ambassadors for these recycling programmes? And are Australian-owned online store fronts encouraged to include recycling prompts at point of sale?

What I'm going to do about it

I now know that I am walking distance from more than one recycler of casual and sports shoes, and will use these in the future for casual shoes.

I plan to see if I can re-sole my disintegrated favourite brand of boots myself. It's a stupid use of my time, between brainstorming economical and practicable ways to do it, sourcing materials, and whatever tinkering and messing around I end up undertaking. Partly it's curiosity; partly I do really enjoy wearing this brand of boots and I want to wear this pair of boots; and partly (dammit) it's because the rest of the boot is in such high condition and made with such good materials that they simply shouldn't have to be disposed of whether ethically or unethically.

But I'd like to know that there's somewhere I can drop off my boots responsibly for recycling whether my tinkering fails or they last years before finally becoming past repair.

About me

My priorities

Certain boxes must be ticked or I will not make a clothing or footwear purchase, even if it means I wander around looking disreputable. Clothing and footwear must:

- Last a long time
- Be comfortable
- Be a colour that pleases my eyes
- Not be a colour that makes me look dead
- Not be a colour that makes me look seasick
- Not be made out of what I deem disgusting fabrics (a slightly variable category over time)
- Not turn me into an advertising billboard for companies I know to have poor social and environmental practices (this is true even when buying second hand)
- Not turn me into a billboard at all

Changes to my priorities

- Life stress has seen me taking less care with checking clothing labels for country of origin and social practices when purchasing items new. For simplicity of purchase I sometimes now even buy from stores where I can be fairly certain the items aren't even in the ballpark of ethical, a dastardly practice that has its genesis in the four thousand years of covid lockdowns in Melbourne when these were the stores open for click-and-collect. (NB – governmental policies can have rather detrimental side effects.)
- Now that I buy mostly from local second hand stores I sometimes forget to check labels for producer and country of manufacture, though I remember to check for fabric type
- I am likely to buy extra items beyond what I need, being extremely pessimistic about further degradation of quality in the 3 - 5 years that I expect it to take me to wear out the first item.
- I am brand loyal, continuing to purchase the same brand until I have had two purchases of substandard performance. Following significant drop in quality I don't then search out an alternative because I don't expect any better from competitors; I just look disreputable for a year or two then end up buying cheap and unethical products out of lazy despair.
- I am no longer willing to endlessly mend items from a previously reasonably good brand which are now produced with multiple areas of failure through shoddy materials or built-in obsolescence of numerous components. I have simply run out of tolerance.

¹ Product Review. Category: Redback Boots <https://www.productreview.com.au/listings/redback-boots> Accessed 28 March 2025.

² Blundstones, Official Blundstones USA Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/blundstoneusa/?hl=en> Accessed 28 March 2025.

³ Shop Ethical! Category: Work Boots. <https://ethical.org.au/categories/738> Accessed 28 March 2025.

⁴ TreadLightly, TreadLightly kicks off a six-month pilot-program to recycle work boots. <https://treadlightly.asga.com.au/treadlightly-kicks-off-six-month-pilot-program-to-recycle-work-boots/> Accessed 28 March 2025. See also TreadLightly, <https://treadlightly.asga.com.au/work-boots/>

⁵ Steel Blue, July 2022. Steel Blue kicks off new TreadLightly initiative to recycle old work boots. <https://steelblue.com.au/steel-blue-kicks-off-new-treadlightly-initiative-to-recycle-old-work-boots/> Accessed 28 March 2025.

⁶ TreadLightly, What we Take. <https://treadlightly.asga.com.au/what-we-take/> Accessed 28 March 2025

⁷ Totally Workwear, Boot Recycling Program. <https://www.totallyworkwear.com.au/pages/boot-recycling> Accessed 28 March 2025.

⁸ Australian Microplastic Assessment Project (AMAP), 2021. Rubber Crumb Impact Report <https://www.turfaustralia.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Rubber-Crumb-Impact-Report-2021.pdf> See also AMAP <https://www.ausmap.org/rubber-crumb-synthetic-turf-research> and ABC News <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-01-31/rubber-playground-surface-health-environmental-concerns/101910170> Accessed 28 March 2025.

⁹ Bata, PVC Recycling Program. <https://bata.net.au/pages/bata-pvc-recycling-program> Accessed 28 March 2025; cf Shop Ethical! Category: Work Boots. <https://ethical.org.au/categories/738> Accessed 28 March 2025.