



SPREP
Secretariat of the Pacific Regional
Environment Programme



This initiative is supported by **PacWastePlus**—a 85-month project funded by the European Union (EU) and implemented by the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) to **sustainably and cost effectively improve regional management of waste and pollution.**

This has been produced with assistance from the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of SPREP and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.

FACTSHEET

Managing ACM Waste in the Pacific



What is Asbestos?

Asbestos has been widely used in the Pacific as a building material and in a range of other uses. Today asbestos containing material (ACM) represents a significant health risk to Pacific Islanders who may be exposed to the asbestos fibres. Over the last decade numerous remediation projects have been undertaken to remove asbestos in the Pacific and reduce the risk of exposure. But much still remains, often in a deteriorating condition where fibres are readily released to the air. The prevalence of ACM is much higher in some countries than others.



Recent projects sponsored by SPREP, ACM waste has been exported for disposal whereas local disposal would, in most cases, be more appropriate. Some Pacific countries, with suitable facilities and procedures in place, do permit the disposal of ACM waste to land.

Why is Asbestos a Problem?

Many Pacific Island buildings still contain asbestos, often in poor condition.

When disturbed, asbestos releases tiny fibres that can be inhaled, causing serious health risks, including lung malfunction and serious cancers.



How is ACM Waste Managed?

The main ways to manage ACM waste safely are:

- 1 Management in Place**
Sealing ACM such as cladding and roofing with protective coatings to prevent fibre release. This is a temporary solution that requires regular monitoring.
- 2 Safe Removal and Landfilling**
Taking ACM waste to a landfill designed to contain it safely.
- 3 Export for Disposal**
Sending ACM waste overseas for disposal in regulated facilities. This is costly and complicated due to international laws.

All the above ways do not destroy ACM waste but simply contains it. There are ways to destroy the ACM waste, but they are very expensive, technically difficult and are not available in Pacific Island countries.

Best Practice for Disposal

Local disposal solutions should be supported where possible (based on PESTLE Assessment – See “Asbestos Landfilling Assessment Report”) where possible. The safest and most affordable way to handle ACM waste in the Pacific is local landfilling, provided it is done under strict safety measures.

Two main local landfill methods:

1

Dedicated ACM Waste Cell

A separate area in a suitable local landfill designed to contain ACM waste securely.

2

Co-disposal

Mixing ACM waste with other landfill waste, ensuring it is well covered.



Challenges in the Pacific

Despite the benefits of local landfill disposal, some barriers exist:

Perception of External Responsibility

There is a belief in some countries that asbestos was introduced by external parties and should therefore be removed and managed by those responsible.

Resistance to Permanent Hazardous Waste Storage

There is general opposition to establishing a dedicated landfill for hazardous waste, with concerns that it will create long-term environmental and social liabilities.

Cultural and Traditional Considerations

Land and water hold deep cultural significance in Pacific societies, and waste disposal can be perceived as an act of disrespect toward these natural resources.

Land Tenure Issues

Many Pacific Island countries have complex land ownership structures, with land being privately owned or held in customary tenure.

Environmental and Health Concerns

Communities express concerns about potential contamination of groundwater and the broader environment. This is despite evidence that properly managed ACM waste landfilling poses minimal risk, and that asbestos is not a serious groundwater contaminant.

Limited Land Availability

Some Pacific countries have little available land, making waste disposal a significant challenge.

Key Recommendations

A PESTLE (Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Legal, Environmental) assessment found that local landfilling is the best solution. It is safe, cost-effective (about 5 times cheaper than exporting), and technically feasible if done correctly.

To improve asbestos management, governments and communities should:



Adopt policies supporting local disposal.



Provide funding and training for proper asbestos handling.



Engage with communities to build awareness and acceptance.



Identify safe landfill sites and develop secure disposal systems.



Conclusion

The safest way to manage ACM waste in the Pacific is **local disposal in well-managed landfills**. This reduces costs, prevents environmental harm, and ensures the safety of communities for future generations. With proper management, risks from ACM waste can be effectively controlled. Good community support and engagement is, however, necessary to address the barriers to local landfilling that exist.