



Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Australia

Dear Committee Secretary

Inquiry into Low Aromatic Fuel Bill 2012

The National Indigenous Drug and Alcohol Committee (NIDAC) welcomes the opportunity to provide advice into the *Inquiry into Low Aromatic Fuel Bill 2012*.

The National Indigenous Drug and Alcohol Committee (NIDAC) was established by the Australian National Council on Drugs (ANCD) to provide independent, expert advice to government on addressing harmful Indigenous alcohol and other drug use, harms and consequences. It consists mostly of Indigenous experts and professionals from the alcohol and other drugs related sector from around the country, including the Northern Territory.

NIDAC strongly endorses the *Low Aromatic Fuel Bill 2012*, which is designed to enhance the rollout of non-sniffable fuel and reduce the impact of petrol sniffing on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities.

This impact on young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their communities is a major concern for NIDAC.

Despite the clear success of low-aromatic fuel in reducing the prevalence of petrol sniffing and the benefit this brings to affected communities, efforts to extend its coverage and restrict availability of regular unleaded petrol have been frustrated by retailers that refuse to stock low-aromatic fuel and stop supplying regular unleaded petrol. NIDAC understands that some petrol retailers have consistently refused to collaborate with communities and government effort, citing a number of issues including that sniffers will turn to other substances as the reason why they were not prepared to collaborate. Due to these various issues continually raised in the media, NIDAC developed a fact sheet which clarifies the evidence for petrol sniffing and the use of opal fuel. A copy of the factsheet is attached.

It is unfortunately clear now that the problem with some retailers cannot be overcome without legislation to allow the government to regulate the supply of fuel in certain affected areas. The *Low Aromatic Fuel Bill 2012* legislation correctly makes provision for a requirement of consultation the designation of controlled areas after consultation and contravention penalties.

There have been, and continues to be some excellent outcomes that have resulted from part of the government's petrol sniffing prevention program and strategies. Petrol sniffing however remains a serious and tragic problem in communities in the Northern Territory, South Australia, Queensland and Western Australia and there is simply too much evidence on the positive changes as evidenced in Central Australia from the introduction of Low Aromatic Fuel for it not to be rolled out across all Indigenous communities that need to address petrol sniffing problems. It is not that often that we can put in place a program that works this well and it would be a national shame to allow one more young Indigenous person, and their family, to suffer permanent brain damage when it can be avoided.

Please do not hesitate to contact the NIDAC Secretariat on 02 61669600 or nidac@ancd.org.au if we can provide you with any further information on this matter.

Yours sincerely

Mr Scott Wilson
Co Deputy Chair
National Indigenous Drug and Alcohol Committee
28 June, 2012



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NATIONAL INDIGENOUS DRUG AND ALCOHOL COMMITTEE

FACTSHEET

Petrol Sniffing

Prevalence

- Existing data indicates the prevalence of petrol sniffing in some rural and remote areas can be as high as 8.4% although there are some issues with gaining reliable data;
- In 2005 there were an estimated 700 petrol sniffers across Central Australia;
- It is a greater problem in rural and remote communities than urban communities;
- General age range of users is from 10 – 19 years

Consequences

- Produces a variety of short term effects from pleasurable feelings of excitement to alcohol like intoxication, to loss of consciousness;
- Acute consequences include respiratory failure, suicide and cardiac arrest;
- Long term health impacts include leukaemia, mental illness, and brain injury;
- Social impacts include violence, crime and family and community breakdown;
- Petrol sniffing has been linked to as many as 60 Aboriginal deaths in the NT between 2000 and 2006, and 121 deaths between 1980 and 1987

Costs

- Financial costs are significant and are borne as a result of premature deaths, hospital costs, other medical costs, quality of life impacts, long-term care costs, community impacts, crime and the criminal justice system;

- The average cost to the community per petrol sniffer is more than \$30,000 per year but can range from about \$16,000 to over \$140,000 per annum (report written by SA Centre for Economics Studies, 2010);
- Institutional care for a person who has acquired permanent damage in Alice Springs, is estimated to be \$160,000 per year;
- A 2006 Access Economics costs benefit analysis report on Opal estimated that the cost of petrol sniffing in the Opal roll out regions across Tennant Creek, NT to the eastern parts of Western Australia and to South Australia was \$38.1m. Health, long term care and rehabilitation impacts accounted for \$12m of this total

Opal Fuel

History

- BP developed Opal fuel in 2004 and commenced distribution in early 2005 to reduce the epidemic of petrol sniffing;
- Contains almost no lead and has only very low levels of the aromatic hydrocarbons which give the high sought by petrol sniffers;
- Prior to its introduction, Comgas (Avgas from Aviation Gas) was used in the 1990s to discourage misuse of fuel as an inhalant

Availability

- Since its introduction, Opal has progressively been distributed to remote Indigenous communities;
- 106 Indigenous communities, roadhouses and other fuel outlets across the NT, WA, SA and QLD used Opal fuel In 2010;
- All petrol stations in Alice Springs now sell the Opal fuel

Effectiveness

- Opal fuel has reduced petrol sniffing and improved health for Indigenous communities significantly;
- *A 2008 government report on the efficacy of the Opal rollout evaluated its efficacy in 74 communities. Overall there was a 70% reduction in sniffing. In 3 communities sniffing activities rose. In 2 of these the rise was due to unleaded petrol still being obtainable;*
- *The rollout has reportedly worked best where there have been simultaneous community-level interventions;*

- Nganampa Health Council on the APY land has conducted 14 surveys to date. These surveys suggest a reduction in the prevalence of petrol sniffing from 8.4% of the entire APY Lands population in 2004 to only 1.3% in 2007 as a result of introducing opal fuel and other strategies;
- *Evidence does not support a significant diversion to other substances where Opal fuel has been rolled out.*

Costs

- A cost-benefit analysis of compulsory replacement of certain fuels with Opal fuel in key regions and towns across Qld, the NT, SA, and WA would result in a greater than \$1 billion cost saving over 25 years;
- It is currently subsidised by the Federal Government (DoHA) to sell at the same price as unleaded fuel;
- These subsidised costs would be offset by savings in health care for those disabled through sniffing as well as reduction in the costs of support services to communities that are dealing with petrol sniffing.

The Future

- The underlying causes for sniffing fuel still needs to be addressed with initiatives such as the provision of drug and alcohol treatment services, adequate housing and employment opportunities.