

**Submission to the
Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs
Inquiry into the Low Aromatic Fuel Bill 2012**

10 August 2012

ADCA Submission

Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs Inquiry Low Aromatic Fuel Bill 2012

The Alcohol and other Drugs Council of Australia (ADCA) welcomes the opportunity to make the following comments to the Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs inquiry into the Low Aromatic Fuel Bill 2012.

ADCA is the national peak body representing the interests of the Australian non-government alcohol and other drugs sector (AOD). It works with government, non-government organisations, business and the community to promote evidence-based, socially just approaches aimed at preventing or reducing the health, economic and social harm of alcohol and other drugs to individuals, families, communities and the nation.

ADCA is involved in the issue of inhalants through its representation of local AOD organisations across all Australian States and Territories; its Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Working Group regards the issue of sniffing petrol and other inhalants as a high priority. The Working Group sees a strong need for prevention activity at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels to build capacity in young people to keep them well and achieving positive outcomes. ADCA enjoys a relationship with the National Indigenous Drug and Alcohol Committee (NIDAC) and is regularly involved in its work and conferences.

ADCA acknowledges the sporadic nature of petrol sniffing and the harm it has caused in remote Australian communities where it is more widespread (d'Abbs & MacLean, 2008ⁱ). It is not a recent phenomenon, having been observed at low levels in some Central Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (A&TSI) communities in the early 1940s. In 1985, Bradyⁱⁱ drew on Department of Aboriginal Affairs' community profiles that showed petrol sniffing occurring in 35 Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory.

Consideration of the cultural background of people using inhalants has led to a holistic approach through the following strategies:

- the reformulation of petrol and spray paint
- community-based diversion programs
- education and support for retailers
- changes to legislation providing direction for law enforcement and health and community care providers
- user rehabilitation and education and,
- Community engagement.

BP Petroleum's OPAL low-aromatic fuel has been rolled out in many areas where petrol sniffing has been a problem. The supply of OPAL instead of standard unleaded fuel has been remarkably successful in countering the incidence of petrol sniffing, with the Government's own figures showing an estimated 70 per cent cut in the practice across all areas and better than 90 per cent in the area where the Central Australian Youth Linkup Service (CAYLUS) is active in countering sniffing.

It was with interest that ADCA accepted an invitation from CAYLUS to meetings in Canberra in June between politicians from across the parliamentary spectrum, representatives from CAYLUS and three women from Central Australian Aboriginal communities. The women said that petrol sniffing continues to remain a problem, and expressed concerns that individual sniffers might trigger a wider outbreak. Media reports since the meetings suggest that this has happened in Lake Nash, a community that has OPAL fuel but is only 80 km away from Urandangi across the Queensland border, where the local fuel outlet refuses to stock OPAL.

CAYLUS' experience leads it to suggest that the availability of unleaded petrol close to isolated Aboriginal communities is what results in flare-ups in sniffing. Outbreaks like that at Lake Nash appear to support CAYLUS' observation.

While the proprietors of a number of fuel outlets appear intransigent on the issue, maintaining their stance against OPAL, their opposition doesn't appear to be based on fact.

The proprietor of the Mount Dare Hotel south of the Northern Territory / South Australian border wrote to the inquiry, saying that, "While your studies say that Opal fuel will not damage your engine, I'm not convinced, long term use may in fact have a detrimental effect on an engine, we have heard of many people in Alice Springs requiring fuel system repairs after using Opal fuel". He has provided no evidence to support his concerns; they appear to be based on hearsay. This is despite repeated assurances from BP Petroleum that the company developed the fuel for vehicles that normally ran on standard unleaded and that it would not harm a vehicle maintained in accordance with manufacturer's recommendations.

The Inquiry would be aware that the Royal Automobile Association of South Australia (RAA) conducted some research on the vehicles claimed to have been affected by Opal fuel. The RAA found no examples of Opal inflicted damage (rather, normal wear and tear for age was found to be the culprit) and concluded that Opal does not appear to pose a risk to vehicles designed for 91 RON fuel. The Automobile Association of the Northern Territory and the Royal Automobile Club of Queensland support this conclusion.

The problem is that while hearsay continues, the fragile nature of the current arrangement remains. As has happened previously, it would take just one retailer in Alice Springs to stop selling Opal for others to follow suit. BP has spoken with ADCA on this issue, providing the reassurance that it is prepared to assist with the installation of Opal compliant infrastructure and to educate consumers on the use of the fuel.

ADCA appreciates the difficulty of doing business in remote Australia. However, it questions Mount Dare's assertion that it doesn't sell unleaded fuel to ATSI motorists, or "promote" their visiting the roadhouse. It's disingenuous for Mount Dare's proprietors to say that it supports the sale of low aromatic fuel in Aboriginal communities but, other than that, to "let communities do whatever they like because it doesn't affect anyone else". The business ignores the fact that scant kilometres away, people are indulging in practices that endanger lives and add to the burdens – both social and medical – many residents of these communities already shoulder.

The office of the Minister for Indigenous Health, Warren Snowdon, announced on July 30 that \$1 million would be put toward diversionary programs in remote communities to provide activities for disaffected young people. This need was highlighted during the meetings that ADCA attended with CAYLUS in Canberra. Minister Snowdon's announcement was welcome, particularly because he also undertook to approach the Premiers of states that border the Northern Territory – as well as the Northern Territory Government – to discuss ways of addressing the use of unleaded petrol in problem areas.

ADCA would like to think that the attached letter to the Prime Minister, which was discussed with Minister Snowdon's office before it was sent, had some bearing on the funding announcement. However, diversionary programs are only part of a multi-tiered approach to addressing this issue.

ADCA was prompted to write to the Prime Minister to protest over the Government's inaction since the 2009 Senate Inquiry into Petrol Sniffing and Substance Misuse in Central Australia and the recommendations which flowed from it. The committee had ascribed as a priority the need to determine, in view of the unwillingness of several fuel retailers to stock OPAL, whether legislation forcing them to do so was possible and practicable. At no point in the Government's response to the committee in 2010 did it suggest otherwise.

While ADCA understands the need for a kid gloves approach to any dealings that involve Commonwealth intervention in State and Territory jurisdictions, it feels that the Government owes it to the people of remote Australia to act decisively – and to act now.

ADCA supports the Low Aromatic Fuel Bill and, as it does in the attached letter, urges immediate action to stop petrol sniffing once and for all. It's a case of having the political will to do so.

I would be happy to discuss this matter with you further. In the first instance, please contact Rob Gill at rob.gill@adca.org.au or 02 6215 9800.

Yours sincerely

David Templeman
Chief Executive Officer

10 August 2012

Attachment: Letter to the Prime Minister July 26, 2012; cc to Minister Snowdon

ⁱ[http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/73AFC6ADE4DEED9CCA25746B00834DA8/\\$File/vol-sub-mis-rvw-int.pdf](http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/73AFC6ADE4DEED9CCA25746B00834DA8/$File/vol-sub-mis-rvw-int.pdf)

ⁱⁱ Children Without Ears – Petrol Sniffing in Australia: Maggie Brady; June 1985 (ISBN 0-7243-7404-3)