

SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE COMMUNITY AFFAIRS REFERENCES COMMITTEE BY BP AUSTRALIA PTY LTD

INQUIRY INTO PETROL SNIFFING IN REMOTE ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES

Introduction

As one of the world's largest companies, BP acknowledges that with this presence comes a clear responsibility to be both progressive in its day to day operations and to demonstrate global leadership in areas linked to our business, such as addressing climate change.

Translated to the Australian social context, this responsibility extends to responding to the human tragedy of petrol sniffing by harnessing the collective resources of our people and technical know-how, and where possible help to reduce the significant harm caused through the misuse of petroleum products.

This resolve has been influenced by several Coroner inquiries into petrol sniffing related deaths in recent years and requests from community advocates to respond to the issue, such as contained in the following email that BP received in December 2002.

“As I write, I can see a ten year old girl outside the window with half a coke bottle filled with unleaded petrol tied over her mouth and nose. She may well never reach her 12th birthday.”

BP Australia's actions in helping to reduce petrol sniffing

BP Australia Pty Ltd in March 2003 embarked on the development of new initiative in conjunction with Indigenous communities in the Western Desert region of the Northern Territory to help reduce the incidence of petrol sniffing amongst Indigenous youth in remote communities. In conjunction with government authorities, BP representatives visited the hardest hit communities in Central Australia. The representatives spoke directly with the young people and their Elders, and queried what it could do “on the ground” to make a tangible difference within the context of existing government

and community programs. Actions emerging from this stakeholder consultation evolved into an initiative called the 3D strategy that then guided BP's subsequent work.

Deterrent – help stop young people from sniffing petrol (eg Opal)

Diversion – provide young people with positive alternative activities to sniffing

Development – assist young people to get back to school

Importantly, revisiting this issue built upon BP's earlier work with the Federal Government which began in the 1990s that saw remote communities in the Northern Territory and South Australia provided with an alternative fuel option AVGAS (funded under the Commonwealth Government program called - Comgas). Endorsed by the Commonwealth Government, AVGAS was made available to remote communities as an alternative fuel because of its lower aromatic content and thus intoxicating qualities to deter sniffing. However due to its higher lead content and perceived harm to motor vehicles, community acceptance of this fuel option had been limited and patchy.

Due to general moves across the fuel industry and customer expectations towards lower lead aviation fuels, it became clear that any new form of unleaded AVGAS was unlikely to be a suitable option for remote communities due to increased levels of aromatic vapours. In response and arising from the visit by company representatives, BP began to investigate whether an entirely new fuel option could be developed. Refinery and technical staff from BP's Kwinana Refinery in particular investigated whether a new unleaded fuel could meet the specification of being both low in aromatics similar to AVGAS, in order to discourage petrol sniffing, and suitable for use in unleaded motor vehicles and two-stroke engines.

The resulting product was then tested and found to meet necessary performance, environmental and toxicological requirements. Following its launch by Health Minister Tony Abbott with BP Australasian President, Gerry Hueston in February 2005, BP began supply of Opal to now 43 remote communities in WA, SA and NT. This rollout was supported by a radio campaign with respected Indigenous Brisbane Lions player, Darryl White delivering information

messages in English, which were then translated into five different Indigenous languages on community radio. Additional written material was also distributed to remote communities through “Fact Sheets” and Opal Information Kits about the new fuel.

BP has continued to work closely with the Department of Health and Ageing in the rollout of Opal.

To ensure that Opal is made available to all communities and is an industry-wide issue, BP has made Opal available for use by competitors.

Importantly, BP acknowledges that Opal can only ever be a part of a holistic solution to the devastating impact of petrol sniffing and represents its attempt at meeting the first part of the 3D strategy – deterrent. To build an even wider approach to assisting remote communities, BP with the assistance of Yirara College and Teen Challenge has also developed a diversionary and development program that resulted in the creation of a ‘return to school program’ in Central Australia. To date, this program assisted 17 young Indigenous people to resume their studies. In future, BP intends to expand upon this work by assisting remote schools with resource material to reinforce the message to students about the harm caused from substance misuse.

BP response to the Inquiry’s terms of reference

(a) the effectiveness of existing laws and policing with respect to petrol sniffing in affected Indigenous communities;

BP is not directly able to comment on this particular area of the inquiry. However, an observation BP made as part of the implementation of its 3D approach to reduce petrol sniffing, noted that some communities have developed their own local solutions, for example Maningrida in Arnhem Land, have had some success in reducing illegal supplies of unleaded petrol coming into their community by making it a condition of all works contracts, that

contractors are not permitted to bring unleaded fuel into their community and if they do, this may result in contract termination.

(b) the effectiveness of diversionary initiatives and community level activities

The following observations were made during the development and implementation of BP's return to school program.

The significance of covering holiday breaks

Although BP through its partnership with Yirara College and Teen Challenge achieved some early success in its return to school program, considerable drop out rates occurred following lengthy holiday breaks.

The importance of 'joined up' initiatives

By linking diversionary activities with a return to school program, BP found this acted as an effective bridge to assist participants transition from being involved with substance abuse, to being involved with a structured school program.

(c) lessons that can be learned from the success some communities have had in reducing petrol sniffing including the impact of non-sniffable Opal petrol.

Minimizing displacement issues

As supplies of standard unleaded fuel dry up in Opal supplied communities, BP has been alerted to an increasing level of desperation and property break-ins as people attempt to find any remaining fuel to sniff. In response, BP is about to distribute to all remote communities specially designed reflective Opal stickers and signage to convey that any vehicles and premises with this signage in place does not contain sniffable fuel.

Building confidence in any new fuel option – dispelling myths held within communities

BP's experience with AVGAS (COMGAS) and early concerns over Opal as a viable option, suggests that a crucial element in any fuel rollout needs to include a culturally appropriate communication campaign that conveys how the fuel meets both vehicle and public health concerns.

Avoiding confusion over Opal's effectiveness

During visits to remote communities in August, several community members expressed some doubt to BP representatives about Opal's effectiveness because they believed they had seen it being sniffed locally. However, rather than yellow (Opal's colour), the fuel was described as being either red or purple in colour, indicating that it was standard unleaded fuel.