

The Chair
Senate Community Affairs References Committee
Inquiry into Petrol Sniffing in Remote Aboriginal Communities
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Sir/Madam

Thank-you for the opportunity to put a brief submission before this committee.

My name is Graham Ring. I am deputy-chair of Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTaR) in Victoria. I also contribute a regular column to the National Indigenous Times newspaper.

However, I make this submission as a private individual - not as a representative of ANTaR or NIT.

Yours sincerely

Graham Ring
Melbourne
28 October 2005

The Urgent Need for a Comprehensive Roll-out of Opal Fuel

I believe that petrol-sniffing in remote Indigenous communities is symptomatic of deep-seated problems for which there are no easy cures. However this symptom requires urgent treatment with a range of measures including the provision of skilled youth workers, treatment and rehabilitation centres, diversionary activities, employment, education, and policing.

Within this context, I see a critical need for the introduction of Opal fuel right through the central desert area. This 'non-sniffable' fuel cannot be a panacea for all the problems that beset remote communities. However, I believe that it can act as a circuit-breaker to remove the immediate danger, and provide communities with the time and space to grapple with the issues that confront them.

Tangentyre Council's Central Australian Youth Link-Up Service (CAYLUS) has identified an area bounded roughly by Coober Pedy, Mt Isa, Tennant Creek and Laverton as containing the largest cluster of petrol sniffers in the country. I believe that the comprehensive roll-out of Opal through this whole region is readily justifiable on both economic and social grounds.

There appears to be uncertainty about the precise additional cost of a comprehensive roll out of non-sniffable fuel. Whether it requires an additional five million or twenty-five million dollars, the amount will be dwarfed by the 13 billion dollars the government collected in fuel excise last year. Sadly it will also pale in comparison to the health costs of caring for the wheel-chair bound sufferers of acquired brain injury who are the living legacy of the scourge.

In October 2004, the Northern Territory Parliament's Select Committee on Substance Abuse in the Community produced a report on 'Petrol Sniffing in Remote Northern Territory Communities'. The committee found that the conservative cost of full time institutional care for a person mentally debilitated through sniffing was \$160,000 a year in an urban centre – and more than twice this amount if the care is provided in remote communities. (Page 23 of the report.)

Reliable estimates put the number of sniffers in the region at around 700. Simple multiplication suggests that petrol sniffing has the potential to become a huge economic burden if it is not addressed.

The crunching of these numbers is essential but not sufficient. I would respectfully urge the committee to give appropriate weight to the untold human misery associated with the damage sniffing causes to the fabric of family and community life.

I refer the committee to the story of ‘Molly’ – a grandmother who found her fourteen year-old son dead in the back room of her house – with a blanket covering the bottle containing petrol pressed up against his face. (Paragraph 22 of the Northern Territory Coroners findings, Alice Springs Coroner’s Court, 10 October 2005)

There is no obvious way to ascribe an economic value to the grief of a grandmother over the death of a child – be it in Melbourne or Mutitjulu. However factors which can’t be quantified should not on this ground alone, be dismissed.

In his forward to the 2004 Comgas Evaluation, Minister Abbott noted that the Comgas scheme was a ‘safe, popular and effective strategy to reduce petrol sniffing in Australia’.

A key finding of the Evaluation (see page 33) was that the effectiveness of non-sniffable fuel in reducing the incidence of sniffing depended most significantly on the distance to the nearest outlet where sniffable fuel could be purchased. Sniffable fuel can be easily obtained in Alice Springs and from there finds its way all too readily into remote ‘Comgas’ communities, where a Coke bottle full of petrol might sell for \$50.

Unless the roll-out of non-sniffable fuel is comprehensive rather than piecemeal, much of the benefit of the scheme is lost. For this reason it is crucial that sniffable fuel be removed from Alice Springs and other major centres in the central desert.

I note that Northern Territory Coroner, Mr Greg Cavanagh SM, recommended that the government support the universal roll-out of Opal fuel. (Alice Springs Coroner’s Court 10 October 2005)

I note also that Recommendation 12(a) of the CAYLUS submission to the same coronial inquest was ‘That the Commonwealth subsidise the comprehensive regional roll-out of Opal fuel in the central Australian Cross-border region’.

In conclusion, I thank you taking the time to read this brief paper and wish you well in your deliberations.

Graham Ring
Melbourne
28 October 2005