

**QUEENSLAND GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO THE  
SENATE COMMUNITY AFFAIRS REFERENCE COMMITTEE**

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## **1. Introduction**

This submission has been prepared on behalf of the Queensland Government in response to an inquiry by the Senate Community Affairs References Committee for report by the first Senate sitting for 2006. The committee's inquiry is concerned with:

- (a) the effectiveness of existing laws and policing with respect to petrol sniffing in affected Indigenous communities
- (b) the effectiveness of diversionary initiatives and community level activities
- (c) lessons that can be learned from the success some communities have had in reducing petrol sniffing including the impact of non-sniffable Opal fuel.

### **1.1 Incidence and severity of petrol sniffing in Queensland**

Volatile substance misuse has been identified as a serious issue in the National Drug Strategy, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples Complementary Action Plan to the National Drugs Strategy 2003-2006 and in *Meeting the challenges of substance misuse: A strategy addressing the misuse of substances, including alcohol, in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Queensland* (Meeting the Challenges of Substance Misuse).

Volatile Substance Misuse (VSM) is defined as 'the deliberate inhalation of a gas or of fumes released from a substance at room temperature for the purpose of intoxication'. Volatile substances are generally separated into four groups, namely volatile solvents, aerosols, gases and nitrites. There are a variety of terms commonly used to describe Volatile Substance Misuse. These include terms such as 'sniffing', 'inhaling', 'chroming', and 'huffing'

Information about incidence of petrol sniffing in remote Indigenous communities is primarily derived from anecdotal sources. However, the persistence and repetition of this anecdotal information suggests a pattern of use. The number of children engaged in this behaviour tends to increase during school holidays and the wet season, when people congregate. Boredom, neglect and abuse are factors that impact on the incidence of sniffing. For some children, sniffing is a means of acceptance within a peer group. For other children it can be a substitute for material needs such as food and safety at home.

The Queensland experience has shown that petrol sniffing in Indigenous communities tends to be episodic. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there may be a persistent core of chronic users around whom the behaviour expands and contracts depending on circumstances. Petrol sniffing is not limited to remote communities; there are reports of a number of children sniffing petrol in larger centres such as Cairns, Rockhampton, Townsville and Brisbane.

There are two main ways that petrol sniffing affects Indigenous communities. At an individual level it can be life threatening and poses significant risks to health, including increasing levels of disability. It also has disruptive and destructive effects on the functioning of families and communities because it affects the behaviour of individuals. Damage to community infrastructure also occurs.

Individuals who sniff petrol are at a high risk of pneumonia and chronic lung disease, trauma, burns, injury, violent mood swings and emotional fragility. In addition, there have been a number of sudden deaths that clearly occurred during acute episodes of

inhalation. These deaths may be related to cardiac arrhythmia and respiratory arrest because of acute effects on the brain stem or cerebral oedema. Lead toxicity of the brain has been a major cause of irreversible brain damage related to petrol sniffing, although this has been reduced with the removal of leaded petrol from the market.

Data suggest that aromatic hydrocarbons such as benzene may contribute to neurological damage. Other long-term sequelae of chronic sniffing include nutritional disturbances, and anaemia and cardiac, liver and renal effects. Cognitive functioning may also be impaired and there is evidence that some of these changes are irreversible (see *Petrol Sniffing In Aboriginal Communities, A Review of Interventions* - D'Abbs and Maclean 2000).

Increased contact with the justice system is frequently associated with petrol sniffing. Sometimes vandalism occurs when young people who are misusing volatile substances are trying to obtain petrol by tampering with bowsers, vehicles, and community owned plant and equipment. On other occasions, young people, having inhaled petrol fumes, are wantonly destructive or break into stores, homes or other buildings to obtain food. Accidental damage occurs from the combination of petrol and naked flames from flares, cigarettes or matches (see *Petrol Sniffing In Aboriginal Communities, A Review of Interventions* - D'Abbs and Maclean 2000).

Some communities in Queensland report between 20 and 60 young people are regularly sniffing petrol. During recent visits to Mornington Island and Doomadgee, Queensland Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy officers were advised by community members and service providers that there are between 20 and 30 young people engaged in sniffing on both communities.

Anecdotal evidence from community justice groups at Mornington Island and Doomadgee suggests that the problem tends to spread like an infection, with key young people who are misusing volatile substances recruiting other younger people to the practice. Community justice groups have reported that children as young as eight years of age are sniffing petrol. Sporadic increases in youth property crime in Aurukun have also been associated with sniffing behaviour.

During the recent reviews of alcohol management plans and liquor restrictions, communities including Aurukun, Palm Island, Doomadgee, Lockhart River, Kowanyama, Napranum, Pormpuraaw and Mornington Island reported petrol sniffing as a problem they are keen to eradicate and prevent. While exact numbers of young people sniffing petrol are impossible to establish, community representatives have estimated numbers range between 15 and 30 young people in various communities.

While collecting evidence for the alcohol management plan reviews, reviewers received anecdotal reports from a number of communities that some people have resorted to petrol sniffing as a replacement for alcohol. This is not an uncommon phenomenon in relation to volatile substance misuse where young people who cannot access more desirable substances resort to using inhalants. The immediate and long-term risks of petrol inhalation make this type of substitution particularly dangerous.

Given the serious health and social impacts of this behaviour, the Queensland Government is committed to working in close partnership with local communities in a holistic way to reduce the incidence of petrol sniffing and the harms associated with volatile substance misuse. To ensure that the benefits of the use of Opal fuel are maximised, these partnerships may need to extend to nearby non-Indigenous communities which are regularly accessed by Indigenous people for petrol supplies.

## **1.2 Queensland Government approach to alcohol and other substance misuse (including volatile substance misuse)**

In September 2005 the Queensland Government launched *Partnerships Queensland: Future directions framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy in Queensland 2005-10* (Partnerships Queensland). Partnerships Queensland is a holistic, integrated framework that focuses on partnerships between government, Indigenous communities and the private and philanthropic sectors to realise better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Partnerships Queensland has lifted the bar in terms of government accountability. It features a performance framework that will measure government progress in terms of direct outcomes against a range of key indicators of Indigenous disadvantage. It is locally driven through engagement mechanisms such as negotiation tables, and allows Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Queenslanders to determine their own priorities and exert greater influence over the government agenda for their communities.

Under Partnerships Queensland, the Queensland Government has committed to addressing alcohol and other drug misuse (including volatile substance misuse) through a three pronged harm minimisation approach that is aligned with the National Drug Strategy:

1. supply reduction
2. demand reduction
3. harm reduction.

Alcohol management has been a noticeable feature of the Partnerships Queensland approach to alcohol and other drug misuse. In 2003-04, alcohol management plans and liquor supply restrictions were introduced into 18 of the 19 Meeting Challenges, Making Choices communities (see Attachment 1) in Queensland.

Alcohol management plans to date have addressed alcohol supply issues. In the 2005-06 State Budget the Queensland Government committed \$12 million over four years to implement the Meeting the Challenges of Substance Misuse strategy, which will serve as a platform for a coordinated response to alcohol and other drug misuse in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, particularly those in remote areas.

On 12 October 2005, the Queensland Government approved the subsidisation of Opal fuel for a trial period of 15 months to assist the introduction of that fuel into Queensland Comgas Scheme communities. This trial subsidisation period, which commenced when the first supply of Opal fuel was delivered to Aurukun on 15 November 2005, is being facilitated by an administrative arrangement under the Queensland Fuel Subsidy Scheme. If the trial proves successful in reducing petrol sniffing it may be followed by a recommendation to the government for a legislative amendment to the Queensland *Fuel Subsidy Act 1997*. That supply reduction initiative will be complemented by demand reduction and harm minimisation strategies under Meeting the Challenges of Substance Misuse.

It is the responsibility of the Queensland Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy to oversee the trial of Opal fuel in Queensland. The Office of State Revenue administers the Queensland Fuel Subsidy Scheme.

An initial evaluation report of the trial will be provided to the Queensland Premier and Treasurer and the Minister for Energy and Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy six months after the beginning of the trial (i.e. May 2006), with a final report produced after 12 months (ie November 2006). Further information on the Queensland Government trial introduction of Opal fuel is contained in Attachment 2.

The Queensland Government recognises that many people using volatile substances are young Indigenous people and that involvement of Indigenous communities is an essential component for responding to the issue.

Since July 2004, the Queensland Government has trialled a response to VSM in five Queensland locations that combines trial police powers to detain users of volatile substances and take them to a place of safety with services that provide a safe place for users of volatile substances to recover from the immediate effects of volatile substance misuse. These strategies were evaluated by the Crime and Misconduct Commission during 2005. In November 2005, the Queensland Government considered a proposal to strengthen its trial response to volatile substance misuse (including petrol sniffing) in response to the release of the Crime and Misconduct Commission's evaluation of trial police powers and the trial place of safety services. The government endorsed the principles contained in the Crime and Misconduct Commission's evaluation report *Responding to Volatile Substance Misuse – Evaluation of Places of Safety Model* and endorsed a number of other actions including:

- the development and dissemination of information, training and education resources
- trial application of the Queensland Fuel Subsidy Scheme to Opal fuel
- service responses to volatile substance misuse in the five trial sites and two additional sites
- improved skill development of frontline workers
- enhanced monitoring and governance arrangements.

The government also noted that it would consider the CMC's recommendation for the state-wide application of expanded police powers and that several government agencies would develop options to support future implementation of such powers.

## **2 Response to the terms of the inquiry**

### **2.1 The effectiveness of existing laws and policing with respect to petrol sniffing in affected Indigenous communities**

Laws and policing have the capacity to reduce volatile substance misuse when they are considered as part of the broader legislative framework, which may impact on the behaviour, rather than from the narrow perspective of policing and mandated treatment.

#### **2.1.1 Additional police powers: Queensland *Summary Offences Act 2005* and *Police Powers and Responsibilities Act 2000***

On 1 July 2004, amendments to the *Police Powers and Responsibilities Act 2000* were implemented in Queensland so that police could ensure that a person affected by volatile substance misuse could receive the necessary treatment and care to enable recovery from the effects of inhaling.

Since the introduction of provisions under the *Police Powers and Responsibilities Act 2000*, police have been able to respond to people misusing volatile substances. The provisions provide powers to search, seize and dispose of potentially harmful things used for inhalation or ingestion (s.371A). In addition, extra powers have been provided for use in a number of declared trial areas (Cairns, Townsville, Mount Isa, Logan and inner Brisbane). In these areas, police can detain a person affected by a substance and convey them to a place of safety (ss. 371B, 371C and 371D). A place of safety could be a hospital, the person's home, a relative or friend's home, or the designated trial 'place of safety'.

The introduction of the *Summary Offences Act 2005* has enhanced the policing response to volatile substance misuse. Section 23, 'Sale of potentially harmful things' provides an offence for individuals who sell 'harmful things' to another person knowing it will be ingested or inhaled. Under the provision, 'harmful things' can include anything that, when inhaled or ingested, is harmful. It is the view of the Queensland Government that this provision will combat the deliberate trafficking of sniffable petrol in areas where Opal fuel will be used.

The Crime and Misconduct Commission has evaluated the implementation of these trial police powers as well as outcomes achieved by the place of safety services in the five designated trial place of safety services. The reports on this evaluation, in which the Crime and Misconduct Commission recommended that the police powers be extended throughout the state, were publicly released on 30 September 2005.

In relation to the place of safety services, the Crime and Misconduct Commission recommended that the services should have better capabilities for referring young people to other services (such as mental health, family support, Indigenous health services) so the underlying causes of volatile substance misuse could be addressed in addition to the immediate need for food, shelter and a safe place to recover. The Crime and Misconduct Commission made a number of recommendations to enhance the power of police to respond effectively to VSM. The most significant recommendations were that the trial police powers be extended throughout the state and additional powers implemented so that police may detain a person affected by



volatile substance misuse for a limited period for the person's own wellbeing and safety in limited circumstances; that police be given the power to require a person's correct name and address and that police be required to arrange for a medical examination of a person being detained under these powers.

The Queensland Government endorsed the principles of the Crime and Misconduct Commission evaluation and is considering both the principles and recommendations, in conjunction with the outcomes of community consultation and national and international information on best practice for dealing with petrol sniffing.

In particular, the Queensland Government is considering the issue of the statewide application of police powers and the possible application of additional powers along with appropriate safeguards, mechanisms and service system responses. To complement the current police powers, the Department of Communities is working in seven locations throughout the state to develop responses that are consistent with the Crime and Misconduct Commission's principles identified in the 'place of safety' evaluation. The Queensland Government is also considering options for public education and informing retailers and treatment options for chronic users of volatile substances.

Other activities and initiatives in which Queensland police have been involved have included:

- providing referrals and information on support services to young people with volatile substance misuse problems
- working with local retailers to identify and implement supply reduction strategies
- increasing patrols and using powers to remove volatile substances being misused
- developing local protocols or memoranda of understanding between police and other agencies (in particular hospitals) in responding to volatile substance misuse incidents
- involvement in and/or initiation of camps, sporting and cultural activities.

### **2.1.2 Legislation affecting retailers – Queensland Fuel Subsidy Scheme**

The Queensland Fuel Subsidy Scheme was introduced in 1997 as a result of the introduction of a Australian Government excise surcharge on fuel. The excise surcharge was designed to assist in preventing revenue losses for states and territories after a High Court decision queried the constitutional validity of business franchise fees imposed by them on tobacco, fuel and liquor ('safety net arrangements').

Unlike the other states and territories, Queensland did not impose business franchise fees for fuel. Therefore, the introduction of the excise surcharge would effectively impose a fuel tax in Queensland and increase petrol prices. Queensland introduced the fuel subsidy scheme to prevent these outcomes.

While the safety net arrangements ended in 2000, with the introduction of the Australian Government's national tax reform measures, the Queensland Government maintained the fuel subsidy scheme. Importantly, eligible fuel types were changed to reflect the break in the excise surcharge link and subsidies are now paid only for motor-spirit and diesel where they are of the type ordinarily sold by a retailer. This definition reflects that the fuel subsidy scheme was not designed to accommodate alternative fuels on the basis of social, health or other policy objectives. The scheme

provides an 8.4 cents per litre subsidy to retailers, the majority of which is passed on to consumers. The same subsidy is also paid to bulk end users of fuel.

Although it is likely that Opal fuel, being unleaded petrol, is a motor-spirit, it has limited distribution and is not of the type ordinarily sold by a retailer. Accordingly, it is not considered fuel for the purposes of the *Fuel Subsidy Act 1997*. However, under the administrative arrangement for the Opal fuel trial, Opal fuel will be considered fuel for the purposes of the Queensland Fuel Subsidy Scheme and be subsidised where it is sold from a retail site located in a community registered for assistance under the Comgas Scheme.

The Queensland Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy will work closely with the Office of State Revenue to ensure the integrity of the trial. The department will assist communities in applying for Comgas Scheme registration and provide other support, for example advising petrol retailers in Comgas Scheme communities to contact the Office of State Revenue for information about registration for the Queensland Fuel Subsidy Scheme.

### **2.1.3 Alcohol management programs – an example of legislation facilitating harm minimisation**

In April 2002, alcohol and substance abuse were identified as urgent priority areas in the Queensland Government's Meeting Challenges, Making Choices strategy. Immediate and ongoing interventions included:

- supply reduction strategies including the types of beverages and limits on carriage
- efforts to crack down on 'sly grogging'
- the development of demand reduction strategies such as diversionary initiatives and treatment and rehabilitation models.

The Alcohol Management Program was initiated by the Queensland Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy in December 2002. The primary goal of the program was the community-driven introduction of alcohol supply restrictions in remote Indigenous communities to minimise harm caused by alcohol misuse and associated violence.

The two key community project activities of the Alcohol Management Program are:

- establishment of statutory community justice groups
- development of community alcohol management plans that outline the community justice group's recommendations on the management of alcohol in their community, including supply and demand reduction strategies, treatment, rehabilitation and education.

The Alcohol Management Program provides an example of supply reduction through state regulation and legislation (the *Liquor Act 1992*), the declaration of dry places by community justice groups and community by-laws. Through these legislative means the Alcohol Management Program controls:

- possession and carriage of alcohol within community areas
- types of alcohol able to be sold within community
- liquor outlet trading hours and other conditions of trading.

The Queensland Government is reviewing the alcohol management plans and restrictions to evaluate their effectiveness by measuring the impact on levels of alcohol-related harm, crime and violence in the 18 Indigenous communities involved in the program. Reviews commence after alcohol restrictions have been in place long enough to adequately gauge the effectiveness of these restrictions.

The government considers review reports and recommendations as reviews are completed. Mornington Island, Aurukun, Doomadgee, Napranum and Mapoon were considered on 29 August 2005. The government endorsed a relaxation of the carriage limit for Mapoon, and the continuation of the carriage limit for the other four communities. The review findings for the remaining communities are scheduled for government consideration in February 2006 and March 2006.

The review findings for the communities of Kowanyama, Pormpuraaw, Lockhart River, Hope Vale and the Northern Peninsula Area communities of Bamaga, Seisia, Umagico, Injinoo and New Mapoon have been presented to each community for their feedback before presentation to the government.

The reviews for Wujul Wujul, Woorabinda and Yarrabah are nearing completion and will be presented to those communities early in 2006.

The effect of alcohol restrictions continues to be positive in most communities. Where sufficient post-alcohol management plan data exists for 18 of the 19 Meeting Challenges, Making Choices communities, hospital admissions for assault and other external injury to June 2005 reveal that:

- since the introduction of alcohol management plans, there have been significant reductions in hospital admissions for assault and other external injury in most communities
- overall, there was a 33 per cent reduction in the quarterly average number of hospital admissions for assault (136.3 pre-restrictions compared to 91.2 post-restrictions) and a 16 per cent reduction in admissions for other external injury pre-alcohol and post-alcohol management plans (201.1 pre-restrictions compared to 169.0 post-restrictions).

## **2.2 The effectiveness of diversionary initiatives and community level activities**

The Queensland Government has reaffirmed its commitment to working in partnership with Indigenous communities to address substance misuse, including volatile substance misuse in the Meeting the Challenges of Substance Misuse Strategy. This strategy is aimed at addressing the misuse of substances in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, with a focus at the community level to address alcohol and other drugs issues across the entire spectrum of use. Particular emphasis will be placed on reducing boredom and other risk factors that influence petrol sniffing and other substance misuse.

The Meeting the Challenges of Substance Misuse Strategy is being implemented through the Alcohol and Other Drugs Demand Reduction Program. This program is a \$12 million Queensland Government initiative that aims to reduce alcohol and other drug use and the associated harms (particularly violence) in discrete Indigenous communities of Queensland over the next four years (2005-09).

Consistent with the National Drug Strategy, the Queensland Government's strategic approach to reducing the harm associated with alcohol and other drugs use is a combination of supply restrictions, harm minimisation, and demand reduction. In 2002, as a part of the Meeting Challenges, Making Choices strategy, the Queensland Government sought to reduce alcohol fuelled violence through a program of reform in restricting the supply and conditions of alcohol consumption in high-need Indigenous communities. The Alcohol and Other Drugs Demand Reduction Program is the next key step in building on and complementing the gains of alcohol supply restrictions.

The program is administered by the Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy and features an inter-agency and multi-disciplinary approach to reducing alcohol and other substance misuse. The program will be driven through three key mechanisms:

- family and youth interventions
- service enhancement and workforce development
- planning and partnerships.

Performance and service delivery contracts with non-government and community organisations, and matched funding and partnership arrangements with other key government agencies, will support these mechanisms.

The Alcohol and Other Drugs Demand Reduction Program is founded on a 'harm minimisation' framework, and is consistent with the National Drug Strategy, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples Complimentary Action Plan and the Queensland Drug Strategy.

The Queensland Police Service is pro-active in its work with local communities to address issues associated with volatile substance misuse. Many diversionary initiatives and activities have proven to be effective. For example, Queensland Police Service initiatives such as activity centres have engaged community members and provided opportunities to participate in worthwhile activities. Those activities have resulted in increased self-esteem and encouraged positive behaviour. The effectiveness of those initiatives lies in recognising the need to address many of the environmental and social conditions that give rise to volatile substance misuse, alcohol and drug abuse.

Although not necessarily the case, volatile substance misuse may exist in the absence of diversionary activities that engage youth. For example, in one community in 2003, a large increase in the number of young people sniffing petrol was recorded after a brief visit to the community by a small number of juveniles from a neighbouring town. At the time, the community was vulnerable with an absence of diversionary programs, no trained personnel or activities to engage the youth. As a consequence, petrol sniffing reached a peak over the Christmas 2003-04 period. Since the introduction of diversionary initiatives into the community, the numbers of youth sniffing petrol have reduced. However, it is noted that a significant problem of petrol sniffing remains.

### **2.3 Lessons that can be learned from the success some communities have had in reducing petrol sniffing including the impact of non-sniffable Opal fuel**

While there is no official data available on the efficacy of Opal fuel in other jurisdictions, there is sufficient anecdotal evidence to support the view that the initial impact of Opal fuel in these jurisdictions has been positive. According to a recent report, in terms of chronic exposure, Opal fuel is the least toxic of all the fuels assessed.

Media articles have suggested that there is some displacement of young people who sniff petrol from areas where Opal fuel has been introduced, to areas where they can still obtain regular petrol. While this displacement may yet occur in Queensland, the impact of such activity should be judged on the balance of probable benefits. Reports from central Australia state that the number of people being displaced is actually quite small and it does point to the effectiveness of the fuel as an alternative.

In Queensland, it is likely that there will be a small highly dependent group of young people sniffing petrol who will present in a number of ways when the supply of abusable petrol dries up. However, the greater number of young people are not as dependent on sniffing and are likely to lose interest and seek other forms of distraction. For this reason, the Opal fuel supply reduction initiative must be supported by other demand reduction activities. The Queensland Government's Alcohol and Other Drugs Demand Reduction Program will provide a platform for suitable diversionary activities to be rolled out in these communities.

In the lead up to the trial of Opal fuel in Queensland, the Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy was advised by Tangentyere Council spokesperson, Mr Blair McFarland via email, that:

*Since the introduction of Opal, there has been no need for other petrol supplies and there is nothing for the young people to steal and sniff. Opal has been rolled out to a number of NT communities with good results. It can be used in all motors except high-octane motors that need Premium unleaded. These can use it but won't get their best performance from Opal, which is not high enough octane. Coastal communities report their outboard motors run better on Opal than other fuels.*

*Opal by itself will reduce sniffing, especially amongst the younger users who can't afford the black market prices. In conjunction with some youth activities, it will reduce the sniffing down to the chronic addicts, who can then be targeted for casework/treatment.*

#### **2.3.1 Example of recent (non-Opal fuel) intervention - Mornington Island**

Petrol sniffing remains an issue of a serious concern for the Mornington Island community, with approximately 20 children engaged in the activity.

OXFAM Australia has been working with children and their families to try to break the cycle of sniffing on Mornington Island. This has involved engaging young people in activity based work on outstations during school holidays to relieve community stresses and pressure. The strategy is to engage children and parents in a supportive environment away from the daily stresses and pressures in the community. However, OXFAM Australia has advised the Queensland Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy that the availability of sniffable fuel serves to weaken the effect of their intervention.

All respondents on Mornington Island stated that Opal fuel was eagerly sought as a means of reducing petrol sniffing and other volatile substance misuse.

This example serves to demonstrate that demand reduction initiatives can reduce sniffing in some instances, but that supply restrictions (such as Opal fuel) are sometimes necessary to reinforce the benefits of demand reduction. Most remote communities have some access to sport and recreation facilities and activities or have a Police Citizens Youth Club. However, the efficacy of those facilities varies widely depending on the community, the time of year, availability of resources, social capital and the individual people involved. The Alcohol and Other Drugs Demand Reduction Program will work at the community level to enhance and support existing initiatives and enable communities to explore new options.

### **2.3.2 Example of recent (non-Opal fuel ) intervention - Lockhart River**

In 1998 the Lockhart River community on eastern Cape York Peninsula initiated the Lockhart River Substance Abuse Project. That project targets substance abuse and self-harm in the community, particularly involving young people.

The primary focus of this project was to provide positive alternatives to substance abuse, but it also involved improved security in areas, locking-up petrol at various sites through the community and a coordinated campaign on the part of local community police to pick up intoxicated children.

The focal point of this project was the creation in 1998 of the Kid's Club as a place for young people to go and play video games, watch videos, and get involved in dancing and other activities. The success of the project is demonstrated by the fact that there are now almost no children in Lockhart River involved in petrol sniffing and attendance at school has improved. Most recent reports are that the program continues to work well and that the Kid's Club was 'packed out' during the 2005-06 school holiday period.

Additionally, important features of the program include:

- rewards are given for good behaviour and are funded by the Lockhart River Shire Council
- the traditional status of individuals who are responsible for guidance and discipline is confirmed (i.e. the Big Uncle solution)
- most significantly, the community internally drives sustainable solutions.

### 3. Conclusion

The Queensland Government will carefully evaluate the trial of Opal fuel in Queensland over the next 15 months. An important aspect of the trial will be the introduction of diversionary activities, particularly those supported through the Alcohol and Other Drugs Demand Reduction Program.

At this stage, the Queensland trial of Opal fuel is restricted to those communities where Opal fuel will be supplied from a retail site located in a community registered by the Australian Government for assistance under the Comgas Scheme, and the retail site is stated as the registered site in the retailer's licence.

The Northern Territory Coroner, Mr Greg Cavanagh SM, in his report dated 10 October 2005, recommended 'that the Commonwealth government support the universal "roll out" of Opal Fuel across the entire Central desert region,...' (<http://www.nt.gov.au/justice/docs/courts/coroner/findings/2005/A22-04>).

There is an argument that fuels such as Opal, with low abuse potential, should be more widely available in remote areas. For example, the present situation where Aurukun remains the only Queensland community registered under the Comgas Scheme will see a lone outlet of Opal fuel surrounded by a region where sniffable petrol is widely available. This phenomenon may be reduced if the Australian Government took a regional approach to the roll out of the Comgas Scheme rather than looking at individual communities in isolation. However, this would require changes to the Comgas Scheme's existing criteria. There would also need to be extensive negotiations across all levels of government before such regional roll outs could be achieved.

The Queensland Government takes the issue of volatile substance misuse seriously. If Queensland communities are not registered with the Comgas Scheme as they apply for the scheme, people in those communities will be denied access to a potentially valuable intervention to overcome the problems of sniffing. The Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy has advised the Australian Government at the Ministerial Council for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs meeting in September 2005 that 'Commonwealth and State Governments must sit down and agree which communities should receive priority in the allocation of Opal fuel, if the Commonwealth's Comgas Scheme is to provide ongoing practical benefits in reducing petrol sniffing in remote indigenous communities.' The Queensland Government has a strong interest in discussing as soon as possible with the Australian Government, the roll out of the Comgas Scheme into more Queensland communities.

At this time, there is anecdotal evidence that Opal fuel has been effective in reducing petrol sniffing in those communities where it has been introduced outside of Queensland. However, there needs to be an increase in vigilance to guard against displacement of young vulnerable sniffers and experimentation with other potentially hazardous and harmful materials.



## Attachment 1

### Meeting Challenges, Making Choices communities

Aurukun Shire

Bamaga

Cherbourg

Doomadgee

Hope Vale

Injinoo

Kowanyama

Lockhart River

Mapoon

Mornington Shire

Napranum

New Mapoon

Palm Island

Pormpuraaw

Seisia

Umagico

Woorabinda

Wujal Wujal

Yarrabah

### Queensland Government trial introduction of Opal fuel

Subsidisation of Opal fuel will be trialed in Queensland under an administrative arrangement for a period of 15 months. The trial commenced when the first supply arrived in Queensland in Aurukun on 15 November 2005.

The subsidisation of Opal fuel is on a trial basis because:

- Opal fuel is a new product and there is not sufficient evidence regarding its efficacy or safety.
- The Queensland Fuel Subsidy Scheme requires legislative amendment to allow fuels such as Opal to be included on a permanent basis.
- A trial provides a mechanism to gauge the efficacy of this and other interventions.
- A trial serves as a mechanism to bring a whole-of-government focus to the issue of petrol sniffing. There will be an evaluation of the Opal fuel substitution and other interventions during the trial period.

The Comgas Scheme requires that communities be located approximately 100 kilometres from the nearest external fuel supply. There are a number of communities in Queensland where Opal fuel will be potentially trialed. Aurukun is already registered under the Comgas Scheme and received its first supply of Opal fuel on 15 November 2005.

Other remote Indigenous communities that fit the published Comgas Scheme criteria for registration under the scheme are the Gulf communities of Doomadgee and Mornington Island, the Cape York communities of Kowanyama, Pormpuraaw, Mapoon, Umagico, Seisia, Bamaga, Injinoo, New Mapoon, Lockhart River (eastern Cape), and Palm Island (near Townsville).

The estimated annual fuel usage for the potentially eligible communities is approximately 1.2 million litres. While some communities have a 'diesel only' policy for council vehicles, petrol is still used in private motor vehicles and small motors including outboard marine engines.

The introduction of Opal fuel into Queensland will depend on the Comgas Scheme registering Queensland communities as they apply. The Alcohol and Other Drugs Demand Reduction Program includes a component to support community initiatives for young people and families that will provide alternative activities and increase the capacity of families to deal with substance use issues. Queensland Health provides treatment in primary health centres in all the remote communities and a planned expansion of alcohol and other drugs services in these areas will provide specialist interventions including prevention.

As at November 2005, Aurukun is the only Queensland community that has been formally registered for the Comgas Scheme. However, the communities of Doomadgee and Palm Island have made formal applications for registration to the Australian Department of Health and Ageing, Office of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health. Kowanyama, Lockhart River, Napranum, Pomppuraaw and Mornington Island have all made contact with the Office of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health and expressed interest in applying for registration in the near future.

The Queensland Fuel Subsidy Scheme is a retail scheme. Subsidisation of Opal fuel under the Queensland Fuel Subsidy Scheme will make no difference to its wholesale price, therefore it is essential that all eligible communities in Queensland are registered with the Comgas Scheme.

Licensing under the Queensland Fuel Subsidy Scheme is voluntary. Accordingly, it is possible that the subsidy may make no difference to prices in Comgas Scheme registered communities, and therefore, despite availability, retailers in the communities may choose not to register on the basis that the additional reporting costs outweigh the benefits of receiving the subsidy.

## **Evaluation**

As part of the evaluation of Opal fuel trial in Queensland, the Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy is conducting a baseline survey of the 19 Meeting Challenges, Making Choices communities identified in Attachment 1. That will provide the first set of data on the extent and prevalence of petrol sniffing and other volatile substance misuse in these communities.

A data set has been developed to capture qualitative and quantitative data in regard to petrol sniffing and youth activities. The collection of data will be an ongoing responsibility of the Queensland Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy.

During the initial three-month transition period, community representatives and professionals will be surveyed using a standardised questionnaire, with respondents interviewed about past and present situations. This process will be followed with monthly contacts with the key respondents. The Queensland Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy is conducting the evaluation as a part of the Alcohol and Other Drugs Demand Reduction Program. The evaluation will indicate trends and community perceptions collected and analysed on a monthly basis.

An initial evaluation report will be compiled after the first six months of the trial, with recommendations for any necessary administrative changes for the continuation of the trial. A final evaluation report will be provided after 12 months, with recommendations about legislative or administrative changes that may be desirable if the Opal fuel trial shows clear positive effects. This will allow a three-month period to complete legislative amendments prior to the end of the trial.

An interdepartmental working group will oversee the trial and assist Indigenous communities to address petrol and other volatile substance misuse. The group will provide expert advice and targeted funding for diversionary activities, identified by each community, to meet its own needs and circumstances specifically aimed at petrol and other volatile substance misuse. This work will be undertaken as part of the activities within the existing Demand Reduction Steering Committee, which supports the implementation of the Meeting the Challenges of Substance Misuse Strategy through the administration of the Alcohol and Other Drugs Demand Reduction Program.