

SENATE COMMUNITY AFFAIRS REFERENCE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Petrol Sniffing and Substance Abuse in Central Australia

Submission by the Alice Springs Town Council

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Petrol Sniffing

In the three years since the last Inquiry, there have been two major contributors to what is, in many respects, a completely changed situation in Central Australia.

The first has been the wholesale replacement of “sniffable” standard unleaded petrol with “non-sniffable” Opal in the whole of the region including Alice Springs. This measure, of which Alice Springs Town Council was an early and strident proponent, was supported and funded by the Federal Government. This was an expensive and brave (as in the “Yes Minister” context) initiative that has contributed to the current, dramatic reduction in petrol sniffing in Central Australia and especially in Alice Springs.

The introduction of Opal fuel to Alice Springs was not a smooth and universally supported measure. The rumour and misinformation spread as to the damaging effect of Opel on vehicles was widespread and had currency with many. An official campaign to address this was generally conceded to be unsuccessful, and it took a concerted campaign by the tourism industry amongst others, using research by a respected “independent” motoring organisation, (the RAA, who tracked down every rumoured breakdown attributed to the use of Opal and showed the lack of veracity to these claims) to bring acceptance to the use of Opal. To this day there are still those whose vehicle only requires a standard unleaded octane that will only use Premium Unleaded in the belief that Opal will adversely affect their vehicle, but they are a small minority. The availability of sniffable Premium fuel in Alice Springs does mean that a source of sniffable fuel is still relatively easily available.

Recommendation: That un-sniffable Premium-replacement fuel is introduced into Alice Springs when available.

The second major contributor was the Intervention and the spotlight it shone and the resources applied to indigenous communities that allowed a “no-tolerance” approach to petrol sniffing to be enacted successfully. The example given by the Council in its previous submission of that of a young mother on a Community pushing a pram with a young baby with a can of petrol hung around its neck to keep it quiet and the acceptance of this practice by those around her would seem inconceivable today in those Communities where Intervention money and resources were applied.

\$55million in complementary measures was promised to support the Opal roll-out, but that money was not allocated evenly through the region. Four Communities received excellent Youth programmes but the remainder (including Alice Springs) did not receive program support funding.

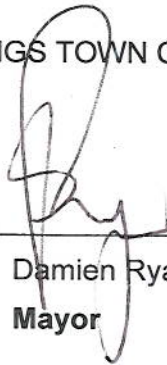
Anecdotal reports suggest that there are, currently, approximately ten active sniffers in Alice Springs, many of whom are originally from Papunya Community. This, interestingly, shows that where the promised package of complimentary measures was not received (it is believed Papunya did not receive the resources applied to some other Communities) sniffing was able to continue even with the removal of sniffable fuels from the Communities. No intervention or complementary measures money was applied to Alice Springs to deal with the “imported” problem of sniffers from the Communities, leaving stretched resources to attend to the problem. In fact resources for Youth supportive structures in Alice Springs are now less than before the roll-out of Opal.

Recommendation: Increased funding is provided for Youth supportive structures in Alice Springs.

Other substance abuse

Council is aware that abuse of other substances, i.e. inhalants such as paint spray cans and glue sniffing, occurs in the region and may, to a very limited extent have substituted for petrol sniffing. It is believed however, that the voluntary, strict controls over the availability of inhalants to purchasers have meant that the problem is not nearly as prevalent as it might otherwise be. These controls were developed through collaboration between agencies and retailers and their success is example that other jurisdictions where inhalant abuse is an issue could follow.

ALICE SPRINGS TOWN COUNCIL



Signed: Damien Ryan
Mayor