



NEWS FEATURE: PETROL SNIFFING IN CENTRAL AUSTRALIA

Implement Opal recommendations, or relive nightmare: ANTaR

Central Australia

NORTHERN TERRITORY

The federal government must force all petrol stations to stock Opal fuel or condemn Aboriginal communities to "re-living the petrol-sniffing nightmare", says a reconciliation group.

A parliamentary inquiry into petrol sniffing on Thursday recommended the government legislate to ensure petrol stations in central

Australia sell the "non-sniffable" Opal fuel.

Close to 120 petrol stations have voluntarily switched to the fuel, but a number of retailers in problem areas refuse to stock it.

The report recommends the federal government continue to subsidise the fuel, which costs around 33 cents a litre more than normal fuel to produce. It also recommends retailers in problem areas should be made to switch to the fuel if they don't do so voluntarily in the next six months.

National Director of the Australians for Na-

tive Title and Reconciliation (ANTaR), David Cooper, has urged the government to swiftly implement all the recommendations.

"It is clear that legislation is required to mandate the supply of Opal fuel within petrol sniffing strategy zones," he said.

"Without legislation, some outlets will continue to sell sniffable fuel and undermine the ability of communities to restrict its availability to young people."

Mr Cooper also said it was "totally unacceptable" that the vast majority of communities

had not yet received any investment in youth programs.

"Unless we do this we're condemning communities to continue re-living the petrol-sniffing nightmare," he said.

Sniffing hit crisis point in Alice Springs in 2006, when up to 500 sniffers roamed the desert town. It has been all but eradicated following the successful rollout of Opal, which is manufactured by BP and has lower levels than standard petrol of aromatics which provide sniffers with a "high". - AAP

Inquiry findings call for full roll out of non-aromatic Opal fuel

Parliament warns scourge of Central Australia could return

By Tara Ravens

NORTHERN TERRITORY

Petrol sniffing could return to central Australia if laws banning the sale of regular petrol are not introduced by the federal government, experts say.

Money also needs to be spent on services to address the underlying reasons why people pick up the habit, which reached epidemic proportions in Alice Springs in 2006 when up to 500 sniffers roamed the desert town.

Since then, following the successful rollout of the "non-sniffable" fuel Opal, the smacked-out addicts who used to wander the streets and communities have all but disappeared.

Manufactured by BP, Opal has lower levels of aromatics than standard petrol, which provide sniffers with a "high".

But while all the Aboriginal communities in Central Australia have voluntarily switched to the new fuel, some petrol stations in the region have refused to stock it.

"(We're) concerned that more will shift away from Opal over time and that the sniffing will return," said Blair McFarland, from the Central Australian Youth Link Up Service.

Mr McFarland is part of a delegation travelling to Canberra to lobby the Rudd government to make it mandatory for all stations to stock Opal and in high risk areas, ban regular fuel altogether.

• FAST FACTS

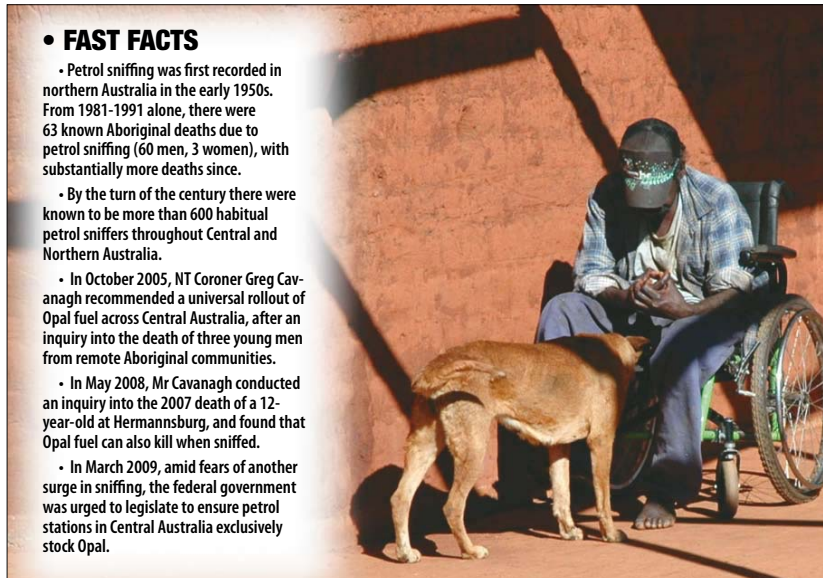
- Petrol sniffing was first recorded in northern Australia in the early 1950s. From 1981-1991 alone, there were 63 known Aboriginal deaths due to petrol sniffing (60 men, 3 women), with substantially more deaths since.

- By the turn of the century there were known to be more than 600 habitual petrol sniffers throughout Central and Northern Australia.

- In October 2005, NT Coroner Greg Cavanagh recommended a universal rollout of Opal fuel across Central Australia, after an inquiry into the death of three young men from remote Aboriginal communities.

- In May 2008, Mr Cavanagh conducted an inquiry into the 2007 death of a 12-year-old at Hermannsburg, and found that Opal fuel can also kill when sniffed.

- In March 2009, amid fears of another surge in sniffing, the federal government was urged to legislate to ensure petrol stations in Central Australia exclusively stock Opal.



"The Commonwealth is best placed to legislate due to the cross-border issues, and they have the power under the Australian constitution to do so," he said.

"Federal legislation would oblige petrol stations in strategic zones to stock Opal to prevent petrol sniffing in nearby Indigenous communities..."

"The NT government can't make these laws because a lot of the petrol stations are over the border but they still affect NT communities."

The delegation also wants a \$20 million investment in infrastructure and youth services, such as recreational halls, hous-

ing and youth workers.

"One reason that the region is still vulnerable to petrol sniffing is that the underlying causes have not been systematically addressed," said Vicki Gillick, coordinator of the Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Women's Council and a member of the delegation.

"There has been some work done but it's far from what's necessary. We need to have something for the kids to do, a substitute that will keep them off cannabis as well as petrol."

Ms Gillick's visit to Canberra is timed to coincide with the release of a report from a Senate inquiry

into petrol sniffing, to be handed down on Thursday.

In October, chairwoman and Greens Senator Rachel Siewert said the committee was considering reducing the availability of standard unleaded petrol.

"We have had a number of very strong submissions about the need to deal with those particular areas that don't have Opal and obviously we need to look at that," she said.

"I can't pre-empt what the committee will find, but certainly we have had a lot of submissions saying that you need to do something about that." - AAP

• HEALTH AFFECTS

- The term 'petrol sniffing' refers to the inhalation of petrol fumes from a container. Chronic users progress to 'huffing', holding a saturated cloth over the nose or mouth for greater concentration of fumes.

- It takes between one and five minutes for the intoxicating effect, which can last from minutes to hours. A headache, or hangover, after sniffing can last for days.

- The immediate short-term effects of petrol sniffing include a feeling of euphoria, numbing sensation, and a sense of invulnerability.

- These effects are followed by giddiness, hallucination and loss of coordination.

- The long-term and severe effects of petrol sniffing include permanent brain damage, severe mood swings, damage to body organs, high blood pressure, and/or sudden death from an arrhythmia (when the heart is not beating regularly). For women, miscarriage and birth defects have been linked to petrol sniffing.

- Common, less severe effects of long-term petrol sniffing include coughs, colds, sleep disorders and nose bleeds.

- Petrol sniffing is often associated with severe burns, because individuals who are intoxicated by the fumes stand too close to open fires.

- Sniffers can asphyxiate if they fall asleep holding a petrol can to the nose because it creates a seal.

* SOURCE: *Of Substance: National Magazine on Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drugs, January 2006 edition.*

COMMENT: THIS IS WHAT THEY SAID

"The Commonwealth is best placed to legislate due to the cross-border issues.... Federal legislation would oblige petrol stations in strategic zones to stock Opal to prevent petrol sniffing in nearby Indigenous communities..."

- Blair McFarland from the Central Australian Youth Link Up Service, on the need for a federal response to combat petrol sniffing in Aboriginal communities.



"We have had a number of very strong submissions about the need to deal with those particular areas that don't have Opal and obviously we need to look at that."

- West Australian Greens Senator and chair of a recent petrol sniffing inquiry by the federal parliament, Rachel Siewert.



"Without legislation, some outlets will continue to sell sniffable fuel and undermine the ability of communities to restrict its availability to young people."

- National Director of Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation, David Cooper speaking recently on the threat petrol sniffing still poses to Aboriginal communities, particularly in Central Australia.

