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**NATIONAL INDIGENOUS DRUG AND ALCOHOL COMMITTEE
MEDIA RELEASE**

National Body Gives Strong Support to the Roll Out of Opal Fuel

The National Indigenous Drug and Alcohol Committee (NIDAC) has strongly endorsed the view of the NPY Women’s Council for sniffable fuel to be banned and for Opal Fuel to be rolled out across the Central Australian Region.

Assoc. Prof Ted Wilkes, NIDAC Chair, said *“It is difficult to imagine anything more dangerous and potentially life debilitating than sniffing petrol. The impact on young Indigenous people and their families from the brain damage it can cause is tragic. The only humane response is to back the call from the women in the region that are left to care for the people harmed from petrol sniffing.”*

Prof Wilkes went on to add that *“there is simply too much evidence on the positive changes in Central Australia from the introduction of Opal fuel for it not to be rolled out across all Indigenous communities that need to address petrol sniffing problems. Even the economic impact evidence supports such a response with a report from the South Australian Centre for Economic Studies last year concluding that a ban in a number of key regions and towns would save more than \$1 billion over 25 years. It is also clear that the concerns raised by those worried about the impact on vehicles and tourism has not transpired.”*

“It is not that often that we can put in place a program that works this well and it would be a national shame to allow one more young Indigenous person and their family to suffer permanent brain damage when it can be avoided.”

National Indigenous Drug and Alcohol Committee:

The National Indigenous Drug and Alcohol Committee (NIDAC) was established by the Australian National Council on Drugs (ANCD) to provide independent expert advice on addressing Indigenous drug and alcohol issues in Australia to the ANCD and Government.

FACTSHEET: Petrol Sniffing

Prevalence

- Existing data indicates the prevalence of petrol sniffing in some rural and remote areas can be as high as 8.4% although there are some issues with gaining reliable data;
- In 2005 there were an estimated 700 petrol sniffers across Central Australia;
- It is a greater problem in rural and remote communities than urban communities;
- General age range of users is from 10 – 19 years;

Consequences

- Produces a variety of short term effects from pleasurable feelings of excitement to alcohol like intoxication, to loss of consciousness;
- Acute consequences include respiratory failure, suicide and cardiac arrest;
- Long term health impacts include leukaemia, mental illness, and brain injury;
- Social impacts include violence, crime and family and community breakdown;
- Petrol sniffing has been linked to as many as 60 Aboriginal deaths in the NT between 2000 and 2006, and 121 deaths between 1980 and 1987.

Costs

- Financial costs are significant and are borne as a result of premature deaths, hospital costs, other medical costs, quality of life impacts, long-term care costs, community impacts, crime and the criminal justice system;
- The average cost to the community per petrol sniffer is more than \$30,000 per year but can range from about \$16,000 to over \$140,000 per annum (report written by SA Centre for Economics Studies, 2010);
- Institutional care for a person who has acquired permanent damage in Alice Springs, is estimated to be \$160,000 per year;
- A 2006 Access Economics costs benefit analysis report on Opal estimated that the cost of petrol sniffing in the Opal roll out regions across Tennant Creek, NT to the eastern parts of Western Australia and to South Australia was \$38.1m. Health, long term care and rehabilitation impacts accounted for \$12m of this total.

FACTSHEET: Opal Fuel

History

- BP developed Opal fuel in 2004 and commenced distribution in early 2005 to reduce the epidemic of petrol sniffing;
- Contains almost no lead and has only very low levels of the aromatic hydrocarbons which give the high sought by petrol sniffers;
- Prior to its introduction, Comgas (Avgas from Aviation Gas) was used in the 1990s to discourage misuse of fuel as an inhalant;

Availability

- Since its introduction, Opal has progressively been distributed to remote Indigenous communities;
- 106 Indigenous communities, roadhouses and other fuel outlets across the NT, WA, SA and QLD used Opal fuel In 2010;
- All petrol stations in Alice Springs now sell the Opal fuel.

Effectiveness

- Has reduced petrol sniffing and improved health for Indigenous communities significantly;
- Australian Government research shows that it has reduced incidence of petrol sniffing up to 94% in affected communities;
- Nganampa Health Council on the APY land has conducted 14 surveys to date. These surveys suggest a reduction in the prevalence of petrol sniffing from 8.4% of the entire APY Lands population in 2004 to only 1.3% in 2007 as a result of introducing opal fuel and other strategies.

Costs

- A cost-benefit analysis of compulsory replacement of certain fuels with Opal fuel in key regions and towns across Qld, the NT, SA, and WA would result in a greater than \$1 billion cost saving over 25 years;
- It is currently subsidised by the Federal Government (DoHA) to sell at the same price as unleaded fuel;
- These subsidised costs would be offset by savings in health care for those disabled through sniffing as well as reduction in the costs of support services to communities that are dealing with petrol sniffing.

The Future

- The underlying causes for sniffing fuel still needs to be addressed with initiatives such as the provision of drug and alcohol treatment services, adequate housing and employment opportunities;
- Some retailers have refused to stock Opal fuel, arguing that their customers, including tourists, do not want it; they also argue that sniffers will just turn to other substances.