



Chief Minister, Andrew Barr
Minister for Health, Rachel Stephen-Smith
Minister for Environment, Rebecca Vassarotti
Minister for Water, Energy and Emissions, Shane Rattenbury
Opposition Leader, Elizabeth Lee

Re: Report into wood heaters and woodsmoke pollution

Dear Chief Minister, Ministers and Leader of the Opposition,

The Tuggeranong Community Council (TCC) endorses the findings of the recent report ["Can Canberra 'Burn Right Tonight' or is there 'no safe level of air pollution'?"](#) by the ACT Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment, Dr Sophie Lewis. As the peak representative body of Tuggeranong residents, the TCC is extremely concerned about the reports' findings relating to the Tuggeranong Valley and the environmental and health impacts wood heater smoke have on our community.

Dr Lewis's report states that *"a minority of Canberra households are responsible for the majority of our air pollution"*. In her report she warns wood heater smoke is associated with adverse respiratory and cardiovascular outcomes and Canberra community members are still largely unable to protect themselves from these risks during cooler months. Dr Lewis highlights that Tuggeranong uniquely suffers from particularly high levels of wood heater pollution compared to other parts of Canberra. She states: *"The environmental burden of wood heater smoke in the ACT is not evenly distributed geographically. Fine particle air pollution (PM2.5) is far more likely in the Tuggeranong Valley. Wood heaters were responsible for 82 per cent of the daily PM2.5 exceedances from the Monash station between 2015 and 2018."* (Page 1)

Dr Lewis also reported; *"Smoke from wood heaters has greater health impacts in cities and urban centres where population densities are higher, in areas that experience colder winters with an increased heating demand and in areas that form geographic basins such as Canberra. These impacts are worse in areas such as those where regular temperature inversions and the shape of the valley 'trap' pollutants from wood heater smoke and prevent it from dispersing. In the ACT, this specific topography occurs in the Tuggeranong Valley, where increases in PM2.5 levels in the colder months lead to exceedances of air quality standards."* (Page 10) In her report Dr Lewis points out the ACT Government has restricted the installation of wood heaters in some parts of Canberra due to topography and potential air quality issues but still allows them to be installed in the Tuggeranong Valley. (Page 29)

The TCC has drawn the ACT Government's attention to woodsmoke pollution in the Tuggeranong Valley over many years. The issue is noted in the TCC's Master Plan and air quality was also on the agenda of the TCC Youth Engagement Forum TCC held on 4 May 2023. The TCC has also supported Government policies and projects to improve air quality and is currently lobbying for a second air quality monitoring station to be installed in the Tuggeranong Valley at Hume. Despite all efforts on the government and community fronts, it seems apparent that, as Dr Lewis's report states; *"there have been little demonstrable reductions in wood heater pollution and its associated health impacts over time."* (Page 1)



Due to the above, the TCC encourages the ACT Government to support the following:

1. Locate more up-to-date monitoring stations around Canberra including Hume
 - a. The **2019 State of the Environment Report recommendations** number **21** - we need *“to increase the number of National Environment Protection (Ambient Air Quality)”* monitoring stations that comply to the National Standard (NEPM) and **22** - *“Urgently undertake an assessment of air pollutant emissions from diffuse sources to update the National Pollutant Inventory data (1999)”*.
2. Implement other recommendations contained in Dr Lewis’s report to:
 - a. **Phase out of wood heaters** - establish a target date for the replacement of wood heaters with electric alternatives in all ACT suburbs (excluding rural areas), as has been done for fossil-fuel gas. This should be supported through accessible financial incentives/support. Ban the installation of new wood heaters in all ACT suburbs (excluding rural areas), for both new and existing builds. Establish a register of wood heaters in the ACT to determine the number and age of wood heaters. Incentivise the removal of wood heaters, before a property in any ACT suburb (excluding rural areas) can be sold. It is interesting that we lobbied for many years for this and gained partial success with the standard for wood smoke heaters being raised and a push (with financial support) to go from wood heaters to gas. This is quite ironic in the current circumstances where the ACT government is trying to phase out Gas.
 - b. **Education about wood heater health risks** - Introduce mandatory labelling explaining the health risks associated with wood heater usage at point of sale for both wood heaters and firewood in the ACT. Include explicit messaging about the health risks associated with wood heater usage in ACT Government education and communication activities, particularly at the point of sale (e.g., Burn Right Tonight program). The associated health risks of fire pits also needs to be talked about.
 - c. **Strengthen compliance.** Develop and apply empirical criteria for determining environmental harm or nuisance from wood heater smoke, such as assessment of smoke composition and air quality monitoring at the affected sites, as part of EPA investigations.

The TCC would also like to add that while the report does not specifically mention it, the health issues of fire pits and wood fired pizza ovens also needs to be looked at. The former in particular, are becoming popular as a lifestyle accessory but they also emit harmful fumes.

The TCC is very concerned about the health of our residents, particularly those with asthma, many of whom have symptoms exacerbated during winter. It is interesting to note that an Asthma Australia survey of 25 thousand Australians in 2021 found:



- People exposed to woodfire heaters are largely unable to protect themselves. Only 28% of the general population and 18% of people with asthma said they are able to protect themselves from woodfire heater smoke when present.
- in Australia, particularly those with asthma, are supportive of regulations to reduce the impact of woodfire heaters. More than three-quarters of the general population (77%) agree that woodfire heaters should not be allowed in urban or built-up areas and over half agree they should be phased out (55%) or banned (54%).
- Support for regulation was even higher amongst people with asthma with 84% supporting regulation of woodfire heaters in urban or built-up areas, 71% supporting a scheme to phase them out and 65% agreeing they should be banned.

See: <https://cleanaircanberra.files.wordpress.com/2022/08/asthma-australia-woodfire-heaters-and-health-survey-report.pdf>

The TCC believes the adoption and full implementation of the above recommendations will lead to a significant improvement in air quality, improved health for all Tuggeranong residents and a reduction in health costs.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Glenys Patulny".

Glenys Patulny
President
Tuggeranong Community Council
12th May, 2023

Cc: Clean Air Canberra