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Submission to the Victoria's Air Quality Statement

I write my submission with a focus on wood smoke pollution. I am concerned that the EPA has not afforded this significant pollutant an appropriate level of focus – and consequently wood smoke continues to be a significant health and environment problem in desperate need of effective measures.

I am a parent of two children aged 10 years and 13 years. I live in the inner northern suburb of Northcote, Victoria and I have two immediate neighbours who have wood heaters and use them as their sole source of heating. The smoke from our neighbour's wood heaters drifts down and surrounds our home. Most evenings in winter we put our children to bed in rooms that smell of smoke. Both of our children have asthma. We rarely open our windows even in the warmer months of the year. For most of the year our kids cannot play in their backyard.

The Environment Protection Authority Victoria (EPA) recently reviewed their Waste Management Policy (Solid Fuel Heating) 2004. The EPA's policy impact statement quantifies the total health costs from PM emissions from the use of wood heaters in Victoria at over \$8 billion over the next ten years. It also states that there is no safe level of wood smoke. Despite the scale and seriousness of the health impacts, the policy proposes to reduce wood heater pollution by just 0.4% by adopting the current Australian standard for wood heater design.

The government policy in this area appears to put forward no other actions. The EPA policy review provides a list of the current ways that the EPA addresses compliance and supports correct operation of wood heaters. The nuisance provisions under the Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008 are mentioned, and it is noted that the EPA provide public information and education programs and develop neighborhood environment improvement plans. This all sounds like it addresses the problem, but it does not.

For the past 14 years we have tried everything to reduce the level of emissions from our neighbour's wood heaters – including talking directly with our neighbours on numerous occasions, enlisting the help of our local council (Darebin), organizing to have the flue extended (at our cost), purchasing a portable air filter, sealing our up home as best we can, meeting with local councilors and MPs, writing to numerous state and federal reviews of wood heaters, consulting a lawyer etc. I have even met with the EPA some years ago now. Despite all this effort very little has changed in our situation.

A year ago we hired a particle meter to see if particles were entering our home. We found that even with all our doors and windows shut, when our neighbours have their wood heaters burning the concentrations of smoke are at a similar level to that of having a cigarette smoker in our home. Our neighbour's house is only metres from our own, and despite sealing up our weatherboard home as best we can, we cannot prevent smoke settling around and eventually entering our home.

My local council has confirmed that, to their knowledge, no local council has ever issued a wood heater operator with a nuisance notice under the Health and Wellbeing Act. This is because the EPA does not have a definition of excessive smoke for wood heaters, and councils are reluctant to issue a notice if the wood heater operator has shown even a miniscule amount of cooperation in reducing emissions.

The 'public information' referred to in the policy statement consists of two pamphlets about wood heaters on the EPA's website giving tips for operating a wood heater correctly and advice about what to do if a neighbour's wood heater is unduly impacting on the community. The EPA's website suggests using dispute resolution services for neighbours who are unhappy about neighbouring wood smoke. Given there are no penalties for excessive wood smoke (including no definition of 'excessive smoke') there is no motivation for a neighbour to agree to go to dispute resolution.

The policy impact statement notes that Local Council officers are also able to provide education through instructing wood heater owners in 'correct operation'. My neighbors have been provided with this education by our council officers on a number of occasions over the past 14 years. My neighbours understand 'correct operation' but there is no one to monitor this correct operation at 11pm at night when my neighbour is tired and turns down the air to the heater so that it smolders for hours overnight, or when he decides to burn his rubbish in his heater because he can't be bothered to put it in his bin on a cold evening. There is no one to see my other neighbour gather up damp wood for burning from down the side of his house, because he has run out of dry wood. People with wood heaters can repeatedly incorrectly operate their heater because there is no monitoring system, and no real penalties. It is also not unusual for one or both of my neighbours to use their wood heaters in the summer months, when we may occasionally have a window open. In this instance, they may well be 'correctly operating' their wood heaters, but this is of little comfort when we find we have a house full of smoke.

Our neighbours have made some adjustments after our repeated complaints. Our next door neighbour agreed to have the height of his flue increased (at our expense) and both neighbours have reduced the frequency with which they allow their heaters to smolder overnight (though on occasion this continues to occur). However, both my neighbours are confirmed in their belief that wood smoke is harmless by the fact that they are legally allowed to use a wood heater and there has been minimal consequence for their incorrect operation at any point. Further, this has led them to believe that by complaining, we are simply being difficult or unreasonable. They do not see any link between wood smoke and our children's asthma. Over the years I have asked the local council officers if they could explain the health issues associated with wood smoke to my neighbours but I have been informed on a number of occasions that Councils are not instructed by the EPA to provide education about health related issues, rather they can only focus on correct operation.

The picture that the EPA paint in the policy impact document would have the government and public believe that wood smoke is an issue being adequately addressed.

'When EPA receives information from the community about potentially non-compliant wood heaters, it undertakes an assessment of the claims. There are few complaints of non-compliance. To date, investigations of alleged non-compliance has found that the heaters do meet the current requirements'.

‘Nuisance smoke—under provisions of the Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008, the owner of a property or the person causing a nuisance must take all reasonable steps to eliminate the nuisance. Smoke from wood heaters can be a nuisance dealt with under that Act. The provisions are enforced by local councils’.

However, the extent of the problem of localized wood smoke pollution is hidden for a number of reasons. There is currently a very low level of public awareness about the health impacts of wood smoke. It is difficult to dispel the myth that wood smoke is good smoke. If people knew that the health impacts of wood smoke are similar (or worse) than cigarette smoke, local councils would see a large spike in complaints. What is the point of having a complaint mechanism through local council if the public is left completely unaware of the risk? The current education strategy of pamphlets on a website is a passive strategy, entirely out of scale to the extent of the problem. Pro-active community education is needed.

Councils in Victoria are not provided with any specific instructions on how they should deal with complaints of wood smoke pollution, there is no best practice and consequently no one body has any real understanding of how this issue is being dealt with. This appears to be the root of why there is a complete absence of broader oversight of the effectiveness of the local response to wood smoke pollution. In addition, the EPA openly frames the issue of wood smoke pollution as a ‘domestic’ issue – and this appears to also be part of the problem. This view continues to downgrade the status of wood smoke pollution as a serious and significant environmental harm and thereby continues to ensure its neglect.

It appears unfortunately that this issue of wood smoke pollution exists in a policy vacuum and there appears to be a lack of leadership or interest from any section of government in addressing the problem. I am concerned about the EPA’s apparent ‘hands off’ approach to this issue. Other jurisdictions have been proactive in reducing emissions and Victoria could look to other states and territories to gather evidence of effective responses.

I don’t believe that the EPA has ever conducted an evaluation of the effectiveness of the response to localized wood smoke complaints. Does the EPA know how many times the Health and Wellbeing Act has been used to address wood smoke complaints? Has the EPA ever followed up with people who have contacted their local council about wood smoke pollution to assess the effectiveness of the council response? Has the EPA ever surveyed public knowledge about the health risks posed by wood smoke?

I am also concerned that the wood heater industry appears to have a disproportionate influence on this issue. The EPA and our local council officers have told me that industry people provide ‘training’ to local councils, and are involved in EPA committees. Where is the involvement of the Asthma Council on EPA committees? Or for that matter - the Stroke Foundation, Lung Foundation, Cancer Council or Heart Foundation? I think the EPA should more proactively seek the voice of people affected by and concerned about wood smoke pollution. For example, health bodies should be invited to participate on committees that look at proposals relating to wood heaters.

I believe that my situation is far from isolated. The voice of people affected by wood smoke is muted because they are not organized as a group – and because most people don't know who to go to. Or they go to their local council and find the response inadequate. Or perhaps they assume like many people that the smoke is harmless because it comes from a natural source, so they simply live with it, unaware of the risk posed to their health.

As mentioned, I have dealt with my local Council to try and reduce the smoke from my neighbours' wood heaters. In a recent email the local officer wrote to me that:

'Assuming the wood heater is operated correctly, it does remain something Council is powerless to act on as wood heaters are a legal form of heating in Victoria.'

The EPA's policy impact statement notes that the option to ban the supply of new wood heaters was assessed. This option is dismissed in the paper with the explanation that 'there is a high likelihood that this option would not achieve any additional reduction in PM emissions over ten years.. as households who would have otherwise replaced their heater with a more efficient new heater may instead keep using a low-efficiency, high-emitting heater.'

The policy impact paper does not consider whether banning the supply of new wood heaters might have a reduction effect in the longer term. The EPA doesn't even consider the option of phasing out wood heaters along with a public education campaign about the health impact. While it may be the case that people simply hold on to their old heaters, knowing that the government is phasing out wood heaters would allow people time to get use to the idea that their next heater has to be less polluting. The EPA has dismissed this option too readily.

The policy impact statement also gives the impression that wood heaters are not really a problem because they are becoming less popular. However, this claim is not supported by other reports of a similar nature which find that 'On balance, we believe total wood heater numbers will remain steady as these factors and continued population growth offset those factors above' (Wood heater Particle Emissions and Operating Efficiency, Standards Cost Benefit Analysis Prepared for the Department of the Environment and Heritage, June 2006).

Victoria has some of the tightest regulations around tobacco smoke. A person can no longer smoke a single cigarette within 10 metres of places where children play. However smoke coming out the top of a wood heater is, in contrast, barely regulated, despite being similar in chemical composition, and of vastly higher concentrations than cigarette smoke.

The Victorian community has a right to know about the damaging impact of wood smoke. In particular they have a right to know they could be damaging their children's health by using a wood heater, that they could be exacerbating their own health problems and that they could be contributing to health problems in their neighborhood.

On the gates of our children's school there is a sign that bans cigarette smoking in and near the school.

Yet there is a house close by with a wood heater that blows smoke over the playground where the children run around and play. As the heater is operated correctly, there is nothing the school can do about the wood smoke.

I am concerned about the longer term impact on the health of my children and family as a result of their ongoing exposure to wood smoke. I am also concerned for the wider community.

In order to address this significant health and environment I ask that the EPA and the government consider the following:

- That the EPA establish a position with a focus on reducing emissions from wood smoke pollution in Victoria. Given that 60 percent of pollution over Melbourne in the winter months come from wood smoke pollution it is incongruous that the EPA do not have a position (let alone a team) dedicated to ensuring that there are more effective responses to this issue
- The EPA has within its powers the ability to make numerous smaller and practical changes to reduce the harm from wood smoke (such as instructing councils to provide health information along with correct operation information about wood heaters, inviting health bodies onto EPA committees, collecting residents views of the councils response, advocating to a health promotion agency that they consider this issue in amongst their other health messages).
- That the EPA commission an independent feasibility comprehensive feasibility study into the potential issues involved in phasing out wood heaters in the longer term. The study should examine the barriers and enablers for phasing out wood heaters and involve health promotion experts, industry experts, local councils and be advised by experts who have previously conducted large scale cultural and community attitude changes.
- That the EPA commit to stronger community representation in wood smoke pollution reviews and on EPA committees (such as neighbours, medical professionals and health agencies with an understanding of the health issues).
- the Victorian government conduct a proactive public health campaign about the health impacts of wood smoke on the basis that wood smoke will have \$8 billion dollar health impact over the next ten years in Victoria, and as a way to reduce harm from wood smoke pollution. Further, that the EPA recommend that such a campaign be led by a health promotion body so that it could be integrated into other health promotion messages (and benefit from the health promotion expertise of those agencies).
- commissioning an independent assessment of the effectiveness of the current responses to localised wood smoke pollution – including surveying public knowledge about the health harms, and looking at the outcomes of initiatives to address wood smoke in other jurisdictions. Further, in developing such an assessment the EPA consider having community representatives able to have input into the study design (such as on a reference group) with the view to use the outcomes of the assessment to improve the current system.

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