

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY**WRITTEN QUESTION**

Mr Maley

to Minister for the Environment and Heritage

Smoke Pollution

Regarding the increased smoke pollution this Dry Season, is the Government considering implementing a more effective fire management plan? And what resources and finances are being added to combat this problem, particularly regarding the Darwin, Palmerston and Rural areas?

ANSWER

Air pollution is best addressed by managing air quality based on a sound understanding of the processes generating air pollutants of concern. Several targeted studies aimed at developing this understanding have been completed or are continuing.

In general, the Darwin region and the Northern Territory as a whole have good air quality in comparison to other jurisdictions. Nonetheless, smoke pollution from landscape fires is significant at times. Studies of the Darwin air shed in 2000 identified particulate matter from dry season bushfires as the primary air quality pollutant of concern in the region. Between March and December of that year, the level of particulate matter less than 10 microns in size (PM₁₀), exceeded the national limit (50 micrograms per cubic metre) on two occasions for a total of six days. One of the goals of the National Environment Protection (Ambient Air Quality) Measure is to contain this exceedence to no more than five days each year by 2008.

Subsequent research in 2001 showed that 13% of the asthma presentations at Royal Darwin Hospital between April and October 2000 were attributed to elevated levels of particulate matter.

Studies assessing the characteristics of bushfires in the region have also been commenced. The NT Bushfires Council is undertaking an assessment of historical bush fire patterns in the Darwin region since 1990. This assessment was commenced in late 2001, with mapping completed of fires in 1999, 2000 and 2001.

Fire management affects many aspects of the lives of Territorians including security of property, agricultural activities and cultural practices. In addition, fire management has significant ramifications for ambient air quality, biodiversity conservation and greenhouse gas emissions. Planning to minimise the impacts of smoke pollution from bushfires must consider all of these issues.

The Government is collaborating with the Northern Territory University and the Menzies School of Health Research on a three year proposal to further investigate the links between bushfire smoke, air pollution and impacts on human health. The proposal involves a Commonwealth contribution of funds and the outcome of the funding bid is not expected to be known until mid 2003.

In addition, the NT Government is examining the feasibility of supporting Aboriginal Traditional Owner methods of fire control to limit the spread and size of fires in Arnhem Land. This may indirectly improve air quality in the Darwin, Palmerston and rural areas as it has been demonstrated that smoke from fires in Arnhem Land can affect Darwin late in the dry season.