

Alcohol Policies and Legislation Review
c/- Department of Health
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July 7, 2017

SUBMISSION RE: REVIEW OF NORTHERN TERRITORY ALCOHOL POLICIES AND LEGISLATION

Roper Gulf Regional Council is one of 17 Local Governments in the Northern Territory, and responsible for delivering services and programs in 12 remote communities spread across a footprint of 186,000 square kilometres.

As an advocate for the 7436 people living in the Council's Local Government Area (source: 2016 Census), it has taken a keen interest in the current Alcohol Policies and Legislation Review, with specific reference to the provision and management of alcohol in remote Indigenous communities.

The Council would like to provide a submission to the review on three key points, namely:

- (1) What impacts have the restrictions of alcohol in communities and town camps had on improving community safety?
- (2) What is the best way to foster community participation in regional planning to reduce alcohol-related harm?
- (3) The economic and social cost of alcohol abuse on the Council's existing and future workforces.

(1) What impacts have the restrictions of alcohol in communities and town camps had on improving community safety?

The Council has 10 Local Authorities within its Local Government Area, eight of which are located in the remote communities of Barunga, Beswick, Bulman, Jilkminggan, Manyallaluk, Minyerri, Ngukurr and Numbulwar, which are designated General Restricted Areas under the provisions of section 74 (1) (a) of the *Liquor Act*.

Each of these Local Authorities has kept a watching brief on alcohol-related harm in their respective communities, and they, in conjunction with the Council and Elected Members, work in partnership with the NT Police's Community Safety Action Committees.

Unfortunately, anecdotal evidence and statistics compiled by the Council's Community Night Patrol (CNP) staff suggest that there has been no reportable improvement in safety as a direct result of alcohol restrictions in communities and town camps within the Roper Gulf region, but that many of the organisation's community safety services, such as CNP, and community development and engagement programs have effected some positive change.

(2) What is the best way to foster community participation in regional planning to reduce alcohol-related harm?

The Council has a vision to make the Roper Gulf region sustainable, viable and vibrant, and believes for that to be achieved, communities need to be included in decision-making processes at all levels of Government, and provided with the consultative and legislative tools to facilitate empowerment and local development that reflects the circumstances and wishes of specific communities.

When the Federal Government enacted the *Northern Territory Emergency Response Act* in 2007, several communities in the Roper Gulf region were seeking to establish a social club similar to the one that currently operates in Beswick, in order to provide a safe and responsible drinking venue for residents.

The Intervention halted these development plans and many communities are again asking for them to be considered.

Barunga residents are calling for a local club to stop drinking-related deaths at various places along the Central Arnhem Highway Road where residents are allowed to consume alcohol.

Residents are concerned about family members, including children, of the drinkers who are caught up in the behaviour of those desperate to circumvent the constraints placed on them by alcohol restrictions – a July 13, 2017 ABC Darwin interview with Barunga community leader Anne Marie Lee that outlines the concerns can be found by clicking here: <http://www.abc.net.au/radio/darwin/programs/drive/calls-for-alcohol-canteen-in-barunga/8614656>.

The Ngukurr Local Authority has also provided formal support for the development of a club, and the Council recently completed a feasibility study to develop a purpose-built sports centre, which would cater to the high level of participation in physical activity in the community.

The study showed such a centre was not financially sustainable, but incorporating a licenced club would support operational costs, in addition to providing Ngukurr residents with a location in which to consume alcohol responsibly, safely and in a controlled manner.

The demand for alcohol may not be reduced overall, but it would reduce the intense pressure being experienced in Mataranka, a regional town which currently bears the brunt of the drinkers' legacy in the region.

The number of permanent campers now living in nearby Mulgga Camp has grown by more than 50 per cent in the past 12 months alone, and the only reason they have done so is the town camp's proximity to alcohol in Mataranka.

These campers are placing an incredible strain on Government assets, and adding to the concentration of litter, noise and antisocial behaviour experienced by residents, business owners and visitors.

Mataranka has applied for funding to develop an Alcohol Management Plan (AMP) several times, but it is not eligible for this level of support from the Federal or NT Governments.

All towns within 100 kilometres of Mataranka have AMPs in place, all of which refer to the availability of alcohol and the associated antisocial issues, yet Mataranka itself is unable to get a plan of its own.

The Council believes that drinking behaviour will change when people have local access to responsible drinking venues.

Facilitating this access through consultation with community leaders will reduce the desperate nature of some residents of remote Indigenous communities in the Roper Gulf region, and provide them with what those living in urban centres across Australia have the privilege of – the legal right to drink safely.

It should also be noted that there are no treatment facilities or alcohol-related services in remote communities within the Council's Local Government Area, nor is there funding available to pay for the operation and upkeep of existing safe houses in some communities.

(3) The economic and social cost of alcohol abuse on the Council's existing and future workforces

Substance abuse – particularly that of alcohol – has a dramatic social and economic impact on residents, ratepayers and businesses in the Roper Gulf region, a situation that is mirrored across the NT to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars every year – a report by Collins and Lapsley (2008) estimated the social cost of alcohol abuse in Australia to be \$15 billion, of which \$10.8b could be attributed to tangible costs, such as labour and health.

While the Council has worked with Local Authorities and communities to develop AMPs where possible, only two have been approved and subsequently demonstrated to be ineffectual, due in part to the Federal Government failing to provide adequate support for a strategy it implemented.

The incidence of alcohol and other substance abuse is high, and having a marked impact on the organisation's finances and service delivery through workforce disruptions, and the costs associated with the repair and replacement of vehicles and infrastructure damaged as a result of alcohol-fuelled violence and antisocial behaviour.

Statistics show that of the 2531 people the Council's CNP staff assisted during the second quarter of 2016-17, 31 per cent were affected by substance abuse.

From the perspective of workforce impact, it is difficult to determine how much alcohol abuse costs the Council annually due to staff absences and injury, as it is impossible to pinpoint which unplanned absences were the result – either directly or indirectly – of alcohol abuse.

However, anecdotal evidence, and financial and human resources records suggest that alcohol abuse is costing the Council in the vicinity of \$600,000 annually through sick days, lost productivity and the costs involved with recruiting new staff due to high turnover attributable to alcohol abuse – this figure includes the cost of rectifying damaged vehicles and infrastructure.

The aforementioned estimation does not take into account lost time and sick days taken as an indirect result of alcohol abuse, including staff members not coming to work because of family issues caused by it.

What is clear is that alcohol abuse is taking a toll on the Council's current workforce and if the existing trend continues, there is no doubt that future workforce planning will need to take into account the impact it is having from social and financial perspectives within the organisation.

In February 2017, the Council requested that the Local Government Association of the NT advocates for the NT Government, via the Department of Housing and Community Services, to undertake a full investigation into the financial and service delivery impacts of workforce alcohol abuse on regional and remote Local Governments in the NT.

On behalf of Roper Gulf Regional Council Executive team and Elected Members, I commend this submission to the panel.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M Berto', written in a cursive style.

Michael Berto
Chief Executive Officer
Roper Gulf Regional Council