



Australian Press Council

Adjudication No. 1399 (adjudicated August 2008)

The Press Council has dismissed a complaint from Barry Chipman, Tasmanian State Manager, Timber Communities Australia (TCA), which stemmed from a short article published on 28 April 2008, in *The Mercury*, Hobart, about the effect of forest burn-off smoke on a Hobart man who suffers from severe asthma.

Mr Chipman's complaint, on behalf of TCA, covers several of the Council's principles, with the central focus on the principle that enjoins publications not to misrepresent or suppress relevant facts.

TCA took exception to the term 'forestry burns' in the first paragraph of an article under the heading *Smoky days make Benn's life a misery*.

The article goes on to describe the effect smoke from annual autumn forest hazard reduction burns has on the health of the Hobart man, an asthma sufferer in the early stages of chronic bronchitis.

A medical expert who is investigating the adverse health effects of air pollution from deliberate burn-offs, bushfires and wood heaters is quoted in the article. A Forestry Tasmania manager is quoted at the end of the piece, saying burns were scheduled to minimise public nuisance.

TCA alleged that the implication that the smoke haze was solely caused by Forests Tasmania was an unfair misrepresentation and the reporter and the editorial management of *The Mercury* had suppressed known facts about the matter, especially that a number of local councils were conducting fuel reduction burns at the time.

Mr Chipman contacted *The Mercury* on several occasions seeking a published correction along lines suggested by him to explain the additional causes of the smoke haze. *The Mercury* declined to do so but offered TCA the opportunity of a published letter to the editor on the issue. Mr Chipman chose not to take up the offer.

In its response *The Mercury* pointed to a body of news stories in issues prior to and subsequent to 28 April in which extensive coverage was given by it and *The Sunday Tasmanian* to both local Council and Forestry Tasmania regeneration burns, as well as coverage of the adverse health impacts of smoke haze.

The Press Council believes that the article, which is the source of TCA's complaint, presents a clear picture to readers about the adverse effect a smoke haze can have on asthma sufferers. TCA's stand is based on the interpretation of 'forestry burn' referring solely to Forests Tasmania. The Council believes a reasonable reader may just as well see 'forestry' as a common noun and 'forestry burn' as a generic term covering a broad range of professionally initiated forest management fires.

In their reports of the practice of autumn forest management burns *The Mercury* and its related publication, *The Sunday Tasmanian*, have demonstrated a consistent, detailed and informative coverage of an important issue of concern to Tasmanians. There is no evidence of facts being misrepresented or suppressed in the article challenged by TCA

[return to top]