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29 JUL 2009

Mr Max Hodge
344 West Tamar Road
RIVERSIDE TAS 7250

Dear Mr Hodge

Thank you for your letter, received on 1 July 2009, in which you commented on the smoke haze in the Tamar Valley in the vicinity of Launceston at 2:30 pm on 12 June 2009. You mentioned that the 'Gunns Ltd 100 mega watt woodfired boiler was spewing dense smoke over the City Centre' at that time. You also referred to the effects on Launceston's air quality of planned burns, the continued installation of wood heaters and emissions from other industries.

I assure you that I share your public health concerns and those of the Launceston community at large in relation to smoke from wood heaters, planned burns and other sources. I am aware that Launceston is particularly susceptible to build up in smoke levels, especially in winter, when cold calm weather conditions are associated with temperature inversions in the Tamar Valley preventing the dispersion of smoke.

Before addressing the specific events of 12 June 2009 referred to in your letter, I would like to briefly point out some of the initiatives implemented by the Tasmanian Government in its efforts to improve air quality across Tasmania and in particular in Launceston.

Over the past decade the Tasmanian Government has been working actively with the Commonwealth Government and with the Launceston City Council (LCC) to improve Launceston's air quality. Initiatives to reduce emissions of wood smoke include: the national wood heater buy-back scheme; the LCC buy-back scheme; smoke patrols; and the introduction of the Distributed Atmospheric Emissions regulations. A variety of media campaigns and public education programs have also been implemented.

The graph attached illustrates the substantial improvement in Launceston's air quality achieved over the past ten years. It shows the decreasing number of exceedences of the NEPM (National Environment Protection Measure) standard for PM10 (particles less than 10 microns in diameter) of 50 micrograms per cubic metre. It shows that in 1997 Launceston had 50 exceedences of the national PM10 standard and that in 2007, for the first time, Launceston met the national goal of no more than five exceedences of the standard. The graph also depicts the dates of commencement and the period of operation of the major programs implemented to improve Launceston's air quality and it provides a brief description of each of the programs.

Notwithstanding this very substantial improvement in Launceston's air quality, the level of particles is still considered to be too high. Further reductions in wood heater emissions and smoke from other sources are necessary to reduce the community's exposure to smoke and the associated health impacts.

As part of the Government's ongoing efforts to achieve further improvements in Launceston's air quality, a home heating working group is presently being constituted under the *Tasmanian Air Quality Strategy 2006*. This working group will review progress on achieving the objectives of the strategy in relation to reduction of smoke from wood heaters and will make recommendations on approaches to further reduce emissions in light of the more stringent national air quality standards expected to be set in the coming years.

In relation to the issue of smoke from planned burns and its health impacts on the Launceston community and other communities around Tasmania, the Government's approach is guided by the principles of the *Environment Protection Policy (Air Quality) 2004* (Air Policy) and the objectives of the *Tasmanian Air Quality Strategy 2006*. In short, the Government's aim is to ensure that smoke from all types of planned burns is managed in accordance with best practice and that smoke is reduced to the lowest practical level consistent with the need to conduct burns.

The Environment Protection Authority (EPA) is working towards these objectives through its participation in a working group on smoke management formed by the Forestry Practices Advisory Council. Other agencies represented on this working group include the Forestry Practices Authority, Forestry Tasmania, Parks and Wildlife Service, The Department of Health and Human Services and representatives of the forestry industry. A major objective of the EPA's participation in this group is to ensure that the principles of the Air Policy are reflected in an amendment to the *Forestry Practices Code* which will, in the future, enable the enforcement of best practice smoke management through the forest practices regulatory system.

An important initiative of the EPA is the development of a *Coordinated Smoke Management Strategy* which was trialled in the 2009 planned burning season. The strategy provides for the coordination of planned burns to minimise the risk of high smoke levels in individual airsheds and requires restrictions to limit the number of burns on days when weather forecasts predict poor smoke dispersal. It requires improved training and accreditation of personnel involved in the planning and conduct of burns.

The establishment of smoke monitoring stations, in addition to those already in place at major population centres, was also proposed, to facilitate the assessment of the smoke management measures implemented under the strategy. To this end, officers supporting the EPA are currently in the process of establishing a pilot air quality network called BLANKET (*Base-Line Air Network for the Environment of Tasmania*).

This network will consist of up to 15 low-cost automatic stations located in areas likely to be subject to smoke from planned burns. Air quality data from these stations will be reported in near real-time to the Environment Division's publicly accessible web site. Several of these stations have already been commissioned and it is expected that the network will be fully operational for the 2010 planned burning season.

The Tasmanian Government remains committed to improving air quality in Launceston and across Tasmania. It will continue to be guided in its approach by the principles of the Air Policy and the objectives of the *Tasmanian Air Quality Strategy 2006*.

In relation to the specific events referred to in your letter, I am informed by officers supporting the EPA that measurements of PM_{2.5} and PM₁₀ (air borne particles less than 2.5 and 10 microns in diameter respectively) obtained from the indicative smoke monitoring instruments located at Ti Tree Bend on the nights of 11th/12th and 12th/13th were both elevated. These nights were also particularly cold. The pattern, observed over this period, of increasing smoke levels in the late afternoon and evening, clearing during the morning is consistent with a domestic wood heater smoke source.

I am aware that smoke from sources external to Launceston, including planned burning, does on occasion affect Launceston's air quality. To ascertain the most probable source of the smoke observed in Launceston on 12 June 2009 officers supporting the EPA have also undertaken an analysis of the air quality measurements collected from Rowella and Lilydale, the two monitoring stations nearest to Launceston, for an interval which includes 11 and 12 June 2009. Rowella, being located in a low population rural setting, is generally not affected by domestic wood smoke. The PM2.5 and PM10 measurements collected at Rowella over the interval in question indicate relatively clean air in the lower Tamar region.

Lilydale, however, is known on occasions to experience elevated particle levels due to smoke from wood heaters. The PM2.5 and PM10 measurements collected at Lilydale over the same interval show a similar pattern to that observed at Launceston, with the greatest particle levels occurring on the nights of 11th/12th and 12th/13th. These were also the coldest nights at Lilydale during this interval. The data collected from Launceston, Rowella and Lilydale all appear consistent with a view that the elevated smoke levels observed at Launceston on 12 June 2009 were due to a combination of particularly cold weather and smoke from domestic wood heaters.

In relation to your comments on smoke emissions from the Gunns Ltd wood-fired boiler I am informed that the Gunns Timber Mill at Lindsay Street operates a 10 MW wood waste fired boiler. Over several years this facility has been the subject of a number of complaints relating to smoke emissions. These complaints were investigated by the EPA. Subsequently, Gunns Ltd has been required by the EPA to undertake considerable work to improve emissions from the boiler.

This work included the commissioning, in October 2008, of a filter bag-house prior to the boiler stack and the installation of continuous monitoring instrumentation in the stack. As a result of this work there has been a measured reduction in particle emissions to levels below those permitted under the *Environment Protection Policy (Air Quality)*.

Your complaint has been registered on the EPA incident database and officers supporting the EPA are currently discussing the matter with Gunns staff and examining records of emissions from the Gunns Ltd boiler stack covering the period of the reported emission. You will be informed of the outcome of the investigation in due course.

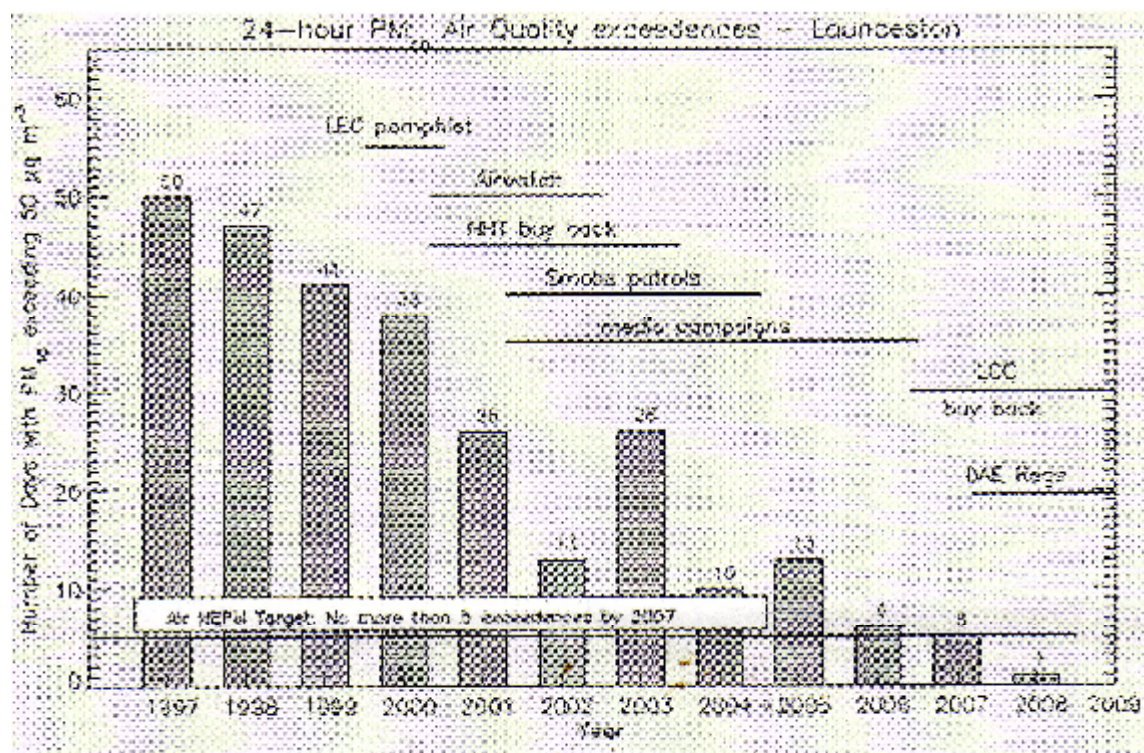
If you have any further queries about these matters you are welcome to contact the Air Specialist supporting the EPA on 6233 6206.

Yours sincerely



Michelle O'Byrne MP

Minister for Environment, Parks and Heritage



Key to chart:

LEC - Launceston Environmental Centre -- pamphlets published on air pollution and wood smoke (2000).

Airwatch - The national schools program Airwatch ran in Tasmania (2001-2003).

NHT buy back - Natural Heritage Trust allocated \$2.01 M funding for a wood heater buy back scheme in Launceston. \$500 granted to applicants for the removal of a wood heater and replacement with a cleaner alternative heating source (2001-2004). Just over 2,200 wood heaters removals were funded by this scheme.

Smoke Patrols - Wood smoke patrols, in conjunction with buy-back scheme, to identify excessively smoking wood heaters and provide education to identified operators. Patrols were funded by the NHT and Launceston City Council (2002-2005).

Media campaigns - Various community educational roadshow advertisements were conducted throughout the state using local newspapers, TV, and radio (2002-2007).

LCC buy back - A wood heater buyback program funded by the Launceston City Council, with resources to allow up to 100 wood heaters removals (2007 - ongoing).

DAE Regs - The Distributed Atmospheric Emission Regulations were implemented in August 2007 under *Environmental Management and Pollution Control Act (1994)*. The regulations deal with woodheater manufacture, sale and importation for sale, as well as woodheater emissions, and provisions for backyard burning.