

Desert project fuels hopes for young sniffers

By Lindsay Murdoch in Darwin

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SENATORS holding a nation-wide inquiry into petrol sniffing are set to hear a remarkable story in Yuendumu, a tiny Aboriginal settlement at the edge of the inhospitable Tanami Desert.

For decades petrol sniffing has made the settlement 290 kilometres north-west of Alice Springs a hell-hole, senators will be told when they make the long trip there on Thursday.

By 1993 there were as many as 70 sniffers in a population of 400, and the community was plagued with problems caused by them, including violence and vandalism.

But in 1994 Yuendumu's Warlpiri elders, fed-up with the young sniffers' destructive behaviour, sent all off them to an outstation called Mount Theo, 160 kilometres away from the community in the desert.

Elders there taught the sniffers traditional culture. With no access to petrol, all the sniffers broke their addiction.

And when they returned to Yuendumu the elders made sure the former sniffers were kept busy with a program of activities.

According to a joint submission to the inquiry by the Federal Department of Health and Ageing and the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, the Mount Theo experiment reduced the number of sniffers in Yuendumu from 70 to zero within a decade.

The experiment could become a model for the Northern Territory's remote communities where there are about 600 addicted sniffers and about 120 people have suffered permanent brain damage from the practice. Much of the evidence sent to the inquiry, which is hearing submissions in Darwin today and Alice Springs tomorrow before going to Yuendumu and Mount Theo, have called for non-sniffable Opal petrol to be sold across central Australia.

The Federal Government has allocated \$9.6 million in this year's budget to subsidise the fuel in 49 communities.

But the seven-member inquiry has been told that supplying Opal is not the only answer.

The Alice Springs-based Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Women's Council said in its submission that sniffing on Anangu Pitjantjatjara lands returned to "previous nightmarish conditions" after switching to Opal early last year.

The Territory's Central Australian Remote Health Office warned in its submission that while district medical officers believed Opal was "by no means a panacea", its "piecemeal" introduction was "grossly inadequate".

"Undoubtedly this pattern of Opal provision will lead to an illicit sly trade in sniffable fuel across communities," the office said. It urged the Government to provide non-sniffable fuel across the entire central Australian region, including the towns of Tennant Creek, Alice Springs, Coober Pedy and Halls Creek.

The Northern Territory Government last week introduced new anti-sniffing laws that allow police to seize petrol if it is abused. They can take intoxicated sniffers to a place of safety and order compulsory treatment programs