

Parliamentary Speech by Nick McKim (Greens member of the Tasmanian House of Assembly) on Woodsmoke

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POLLUTION FROM DOMESTIC WOOD HEATERS

[6.42. p.m.]

Mr McKIM (Franklin) - Madam Speaker, I rise to speak on the issue of air quality, specifically smoke and particulate matter emitted from domestic wood heaters in Tasmania. We know that smoke from wood heaters is a major source of air pollution in many parts of Tasmania, and it is a significant health hazard. We also know pollutants in wood smoke are toxic and can have extremely deleterious long-term effects on health.

The EPA has identified particulate matter as a key air quality issue in Tasmania. Particulate matter can come from a range of sources, industrial emissions, planned burning, unplanned burns such as bushfires, and motor vehicle emissions, but also in significant quantity from domestic wood heaters. In 2013, the air quality monitoring network, BLANKET, which is the baseline air network for the EPA in Tasmania that reports real-time air quality, found that smoke levels in many Tasmanian towns reported poorer air quality than Launceston, which has traditionally been highlighted as a town with very poor air quality caused by domestic wood heaters. Towns that had poorer air quality than Launceston in 2013 included New Norfolk, Longford, Geeveston, Hadsden and Perth.

The CSIRO did a study in the Huon Valley in 2012, specifically in Geeveston, in my electorate, and found that between 70 and 80 per cent of the air pollution in Geeveston was associated with domestic wood heaters, and, shockingly, found that Geeveston, which has just 277 houses, has one of the worst air qualities in Australia.

Wood smoke has been referred to by many as the witches' brew of carcinogens. It contains polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, and these are known carcinogens. The major source of polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons in Australia is from solid fuel burning domestic heaters. Wood smoke has many hazardous air pollutants, or HAPs, fine particulate pollution including ash, and also contains volatile organic compounds.

It is important to acknowledge there are stricter Australian standards relating to wood heaters. However, even given that, new wood heaters will still emit more hazardous air pollutants in 10 hours of burning than a new passenger vehicle does in an entire year of driving on average. A wood heater burning two tonnes of firewood will emit as much particulate matter as 196 new passenger cars would emit in the same time. The Lung Foundation of Tasmania has stated there is no safe level of exposure to particulate pollution and the long-term consequences include lung cancer and heart disease.

The West Australian Government has reported that air pollution from wood heaters and open fireplaces in Perth accounts for 16 premature deaths each year, four extra cases of lung cancer and 905 extra hospital admission per year.

Launceston has seen a significant fall in the number of houses using wood heaters. I acknowledge the previous environment minister, Judy Jackson, and the work she did on this matter, and also previous housing minister, Lara Giddings, who oversaw a program of moving wood heaters out of Housing Tasmania. I acknowledge the initiatives they put in place. One reason for the success of the Launceston program was the emphasis on the importance of switching to heat sources that polluted the atmosphere far less than domestic, solid heaters do.

It is time for further action on this issue. The minister for Environment and the Minister for Health need to get together and work out an action plan to improve air quality in a range of Tasmanian towns. That plan should include better monitoring, including better base line monitoring, more education on how to use wood heaters efficiently, better monitoring of firewood because green wood is more polluting than dry wood, and giving people the ability to monitor wood smoke in their communities. I will acknowledge there that the EPA does have some devices available for people to borrow to monitor local wood smoke, but there need to be more of them and they need to be more widely available through Tasmanian communities.

We need a program to provide assistance for people to replace inefficient wood heaters in their homes with more efficient ways of heating their home. Specifically, it is now time we considered the building code in Tasmania so that wood heaters are not permitted in new dwellings in Tasmania. This is an approach that has been taken in cities around the world that have poor air quality, including Christchurch and Otago in New Zealand. Montreal has just banned them entirely, whether they were in new or existing buildings. New houses ought to be required to be designed to be energy-efficient, including properly insulated, so that heating requirements in those houses are lower than older houses. We need a situation where in new houses in Tasmania it ought not be possible to install a wood heater because of the impact that wood heaters have on human health.

Mr Ferguson - Would a pellet heater qualify?

Mr McKIM - I appreciate your interest in this, minister. My understanding is that pellet heaters emit a lower quantity of particulate matter than do traditional wood heaters, so that may well assist. If that was something you would be prepared to consider, we would be prepared to work proactively with you.

This is not only an issue that goes directly to human health, it goes to the quality of our environment and to the cost pressures which governments right around Australia and the developed world are facing around their health system. The health minister, who is in the House, would know that health inflation is running significantly higher than the average of inflation. We need to do more to try to ensure our quality of health rather than just relying on our critical care system.

Time expired.