

Media Release

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Improving health and safety in NTER staff accommodation

The Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) is strengthening occupational health and safety (OH&S) protocols covering staff accommodation in remote Indigenous communities, as part of the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER).

The changes follow the emergence of a second round of air quality issues in staff accommodation being used in NTER communities.

The safety and wellbeing of staff is our highest priority. The Government understands this has been a difficult time for affected staff and their families and we will be providing further information as soon as we can.

FaHCSIA is offering health checks to all staff who have lived in the affected demountables and is keeping NTER staff fully informed of all developments.

FaHCSIA is introducing new OH&S protocols to mitigate against further air quality issues:

- In addition to regular maintenance and OH&S inspections, regular testing of all staff accommodation will occur to make sure air quality standards are being met.
- FaHCSIA is working with the supplier and installers of the Australian made demountable accommodation to increase ventilation by placing extra natural air flow vents in the walls.
- Once the accommodation is in place and before a staff member moves in, the accommodation will be rigorously tested to make sure that the internal air quality meets national standards.
- FaHCSIA will develop staff accommodation operating procedures that address the specific requirements of staff living in temporary accommodation structures.
- Staff will receive information on strategies for maintaining good air quality in temporary accommodation structures before moving in.
- Staff guidelines will be provided on maintaining acceptable levels of ventilation, particularly

during periods when the accommodation is not occupied. Advice on items or products that can lead to excessive fumes in small structures, as well as those safe to use, will also be provided to staff.

In April 2008, an independent review by Mr Tony Blunn was commissioned by FaHCSIA into the Department's handling of the exposure of NTER staff residing in container accommodation. Mr Blunn reported in June 2008.

FaHCSIA closely followed the recommendations of the Blunn Report in the subsequent procurement and installation of the new demountable accommodation for staff based in the NTER communities.

The new demountables were constructed in Australia by Ausco Modular Pty Ltd. Forty-four of these demountables were placed in 23 NTER communities.

Building environment experts CETEC did an independent assessment of the demountables for suitability, prior to their purchase.

NTER staff began moving into the new demountable accommodation in November 2008 after OH&S checks had been conducted.

Concerns about the air quality of the new housing in two communities - Robinson River and Galiwin'ku - were raised by staff with FaHCSIA management in February 2009. FaHCSIA staff undertook preliminary testing in these two communities

Affected staff were immediately moved to alternative accommodation when the testing returned readings indicating formaldehyde at levels above acceptable standards.

FaHCSIA contacted staff in demountables in the other 21 communities to see if they had any concerns about the internal air quality. Staff in eight of these communities reported odours in their accommodation.

Subsequent air quality testing by CETEC indicated concerns with indoor air quality in demountables in eight further communities (Naiyu, Minjilang, Waruwu, Belyuen Palumpa, Nguui, Pirlangimpi and Yirrkala). Staff in these demountables have been relocated, mostly to alternative accommodation in the communities.

Test results indicate that levels for formaldehyde and/or Total Volatile Organic Compounds are above the recommended National Industrial Chemical Notification Assessment Scheme (NICNAS) for 18 demountables in communities where concerns were raised.

Concerns over air quality in a demountable in Angurugu have recently been raised by the GBM. The GBM has been relocated and air quality tests will be conducted shortly.

FaHCSIA and CETEC will continue with air quality testing of the remaining new demountables in NTER communities throughout April.

Natural air flow vents have now been installed in the demountables in Galiwin'ku, Robinson River and Naiyu. Rigorous testing is underway to ensure these modifications have the desired effect of improving air quality to meet NICNAS standards.

Staff will not return to the affected demountables until FaHCSIA and the air quality experts are satisfied that the air quality issues have been resolved. We will be providing further information when it becomes available.

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