



MEDIA RELEASE

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NT Government must withdraw Stronger Futures Alcohol Bill

The Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance of the Northern Territory (AMSANT), the Northern Australia Aboriginal Justice Agency (NAAJA) and the Aboriginal Housing NT (AHNT) are calling on the Northern Territory Government to immediately shelve legislation that could allow take-away alcohol into more than 430 Community Living Areas, town camps and other small communities from mid-July*.

These communities became Alcohol Protected Areas (APAs) under the 2007 Federal Intervention, and this continued under Federal Labor's *Stronger Futures* legislation. The alcohol-related *Stronger Futures* provisions will expire on 16th July. Territory communities that were already 'dry' General Restricted Areas for many years, through their own choice, will keep that status – but the APA communities will have to apply to stay alcohol-free or the condition will lapse and they will have no restrictions.

If the Government's amendments to the Liquor Act Bill is passed in May, it will open the floodgates to take-away alcohol unless communities ask the Director of Licensing to declare them 'dry.'

"There has been no proper consultation, and there simply cannot be any in the short time available. Aboriginal health organisations and peak bodies did not know about the Bill," said Mr Paterson, CEO of AMSANT.

"Consultations for the proposed changes have not even begun", Mr Paterson said.

"This is a dangerous move that could undo the good results of many of the Government's own alcohol reforms. It will affect many small communities, homelands and outstations close to larger ones and some larger remote communities as well. If they either do nothing or choose to let take-away alcohol in, the upshot will be a mix of 'dry' and unrestricted communities that will be impossible to monitor, with alcohol flowing freely between them – a recipe for disaster," said Priscilla Atkins, CEO of NAAJA.

"This Government has introduced many excellent alcohol reforms, and this sudden and puzzling change is a backward step that has not been explained properly to anyone. Why not move to an opt out system instead which would ensure all communities make an active decision about what they want to do rather than simply have the current protections taken away," added Mr. Paterson.

"The alcohol-related Stronger Futures provisions, combined with the Minimum Unit Price (MUP) or floor price, and especially the presence of Police Auxiliary Liquor Inspectors (PALIs) in Alice Springs, Tennant Creek and Katherine, has kept a lot of alcohol out of these communities.

"What will happen in central Australia under the proposed NT amendments, for example, is that residents of communities that don't ask to stay alcohol-free, such as outstations, town camps, and communities like Amoonguna, will be able to buy take-away alcohol and drink it in their home communities. Some of these communities are very close to larger, historically 'dry' communities – Ntaria/Hermannsburg for example. It's as clear as day that alcohol will end up all over the place."

“We predict that this will lead to an increase in alcohol-related harm, including illness, injury and offending. In many Territory towns, residents, businesses, police and other agencies are struggling with ongoing high rates of property and personal offences, mostly committed by youth. We don’t need more trouble,” said Leeanne Caton from Aboriginal Housing NT.

“How will the PALIs in Alice Springs, Tennant Creek and Katherine be able to differentiate between customers from the continuing, historically restricted communities and what could be hundreds that will be allowed to have alcohol if they don’t ‘opt in’?”, she continued.

“What will happen to women, kids and other at-risk people in Darwin’s town camps and remote Top End outstations when people can buy take-away alcohol again? It is simply not possible for them to have a say about this in such a short time. Consultations on the proposed changes have not yet begun”, she added.

“The Chief Minister and other NT Ministers are trying to justify the change to the general public by saying the current law is racist. We say it is a beneficial *special measure* under High Court’s current definition and should continue for at least two years with provision for communities to opt out after proper consultation if they so choose. To pull out now without such consultation would be utterly irresponsible,” said Priscilla Atkins.

The NT Government has negotiated continued Federal funding, including for children’s services, mental health and alcohol treatment services in the NT with the cessation of Stronger Futures in Julyⁱ. It should not turn around and simultaneously let alcohol flow into these communities, and the Federal Government should not stand by and let it happen.

“We call on the Chief Minister in the strongest terms to cease playing with Aboriginal people’s lives. High levels of alcohol consumption continue to lead to serious health and social problems in the Territory. This Bill must be withdrawn now, or the Federal Government must act.” concluded Mr. Paterson

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ⁱ <https://ministers.pmc.gov.au/wyatt/2022/extension-remote-aboriginal-investment-northern-territory>

* See list on NT Government’s Excel spreadsheet attached.