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Dr Roscoe Taylor
Director of Public Health

Thursday, 22 April 2010

Health Warning – Smoke in the Burnie area

People with breathing difficulties living in areas around Burnie affected by yesterday’s planned vegetation or forestry burns have been advised by the Director of Public Health to take precautions today if the air quality remains poor.

“Smoke from burnoffs in the Burnie area has caused very high particle levels in the air overnight, that in my opinion clearly have the potential to cause public health harms,” said Dr Taylor.

“Fortunately the air quality is improving rapidly this morning.

“Healthy adults generally find that any symptoms they may develop from exposure to vegetation smoke clear as soon as the smoke disappears.

“But for some people exposure can be more serious and it is sensible to take some fairly basic precautions if there is a large amount of smoke in the area.

“Fine smoke particles are known to affect breathing. The smaller the particles, the deeper they go into the lungs,” Dr Taylor said.

The air quality data from the EPA’s new BLANKET monitoring system is showing that most of the smoke particles over the past 24 hours have been of the fine PM2.5 type.

These particles can cause a variety of health problems, from itchy or burning eyes, throat irritation and runny nose, to more serious conditions such as bronchitis and asthma.

Dr Taylor said smoke can also aggravate existing heart and lung conditions, including chronic bronchitis, emphysema and asthma.

“Symptoms from exposure can occur for several days after smoke is inhaled, so people with these conditions need to be vigilant with their treatment programs.

“If symptoms do not settle down, those affected should seek medical advice,” Dr Taylor said.

“The following precautions may also help:

- Staying indoors with windows and doors closed may provide some protection,
- Air-conditioning can improve the quality of the air you breathe (make sure the intake is switched to recirculate),
- Avoid vigorous exercise (especially young children and the elderly or if you have a respiratory condition such as asthma, heart disease or diabetes).
- If you are an asthmatic or have a respiratory or heart condition and you develop symptoms - shortness of breath, cough, wheeze, or chest pain - then you should rest and follow your prescribed treatment plan. Always try to keep on hand at least 5 days supply of medications.
- If symptoms do not settle, you should seek medical advice. People on home oxygen treatment should continue as prescribed, if breathlessness worsens, contact your doctor.”

Dr Taylor said that he supports the request by the Director of the Environment Protection Authority that there be no more burns in the area until weather patterns make it safer.

“The national advisory reporting standard for PM2.5 particles is a 24-hour average of 25 micrograms per cubic metre of air. We don’t yet know what the 24 hour average figure was but the Emu River monitoring station overnight indicates it will be a figure many times in excess of this.

“Poor air quality at this level is unacceptable. While I believe there has been a significant concerted effort over the past couple of years by the forestry industry to improve industry practices, events over the past week have clearly shown that there is scope for improvement. I encourage industry and other contributors including farmers and other landholders to help prevent further episodes of this magnitude,” Dr Taylor said.

A fact sheet with helpful information on bushfire and planned burn off smoke is available at the following address;

http://www.dhhs.tas.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0018/8640/bushfire_smoke_factsheet_Aug09.pdf

Further information: Tasmanian Government Communications Unit

Phone: (03) 6233 6573

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