

Asthma group bites tongue

Article from: **MERCURY**

By MICHAEL STEDMAN

April 27, 2008 12:00am

THE Asthma Foundation of Tasmania has refused to criticise the smoky burn-offs of the past week, saying it is not qualified nor the appropriate body to say whether they should or should not occur.

"We are not denying smoke can be harmful but we are not in the business of saying regeneration burning should or shouldn't occur," foundation chief executive officer Cathy Beswick said.

"Some people say we are not looking after the best interests of people with asthma, but we can't become a lobby group.

"We get funding from a variety of sources and if we start talking about burn-offs without looking at the science, that could affect the funding for programs we do in the community."

Ms Beswick said her organisation did not receive funding from the forestry industry.

She said the public needed to be better informed by the industry about when and where burn-offs would take place so asthmatics could manage their condition.

Cystic Fibrosis Tasmania president Aaron Mackrill said on bad smoke days sufferers of the chronic lung disease virtually became prisoners in their own home.

"You have got to weigh it up -- if it is a really bad day and you risk affecting your lungs and it could mean hospital admission, it is better to stay out of it for a day or two rather than risk having a week in hospital," Mr Mackrill said.

Forestry Tasmania, which conducted 24 low- and high-intensity burn-offs in the state's South last week, admitted it sometimes "got it wrong" when deciding to do a burn-off but said it always tried to be a "good corporate citizen".

Large fuel-reduction burn-offs including one at Knocklofty Reserve by the Hobart City Council had contributed significantly to the haze hanging over Hobart, it said.

"I don't like it when the bloke down the road lights his incinerator and fills the place with smoke -- nobody likes to be smoked out -- and it is not in our best interests to go upsetting people," Forestry Tasmania fire manager Tony Blanks said.

He said strict planning was carried out before any burn-off was started.

The agency said it used weather forecasts and detailed smoke dispersion modelling, developed by the Bureau of Meteorology, to predict where smoke would drift.

Bureau of Meteorology acting severe weather manager Simon McCulloch said a lack of wind and a high-pressure system that sat over Tasmania for a fortnight had created a low inversion of air that trapped smoke close to the ground.

The weather pattern and inversion had also caused smoke from burn-offs in Victoria to drift across the state, he said.

"It is not really our call as to whether they burn or not -- we tell them what the conditions are and they decide whether to go ahead or not," Mr McCulloch said.

There is no regulation to limit the number of burn-offs that may be going at the same time at this time of year.

Outside of the permit period of the warmer months, the decision to light any burn-off rests with the landowner.

The Tasmanian Air Quality Strategy 2006 identifies a need for an "overall decision-making authority" to oversee burn-offs.

In 2003 multiple burn-offs caused the National Environment Protection Measure Standard for PM10 particulates (pollution) of 50 micrograms per cubic metre to be breached in Launceston for four consecutive days. No penalties were issued.

In 2006 a Gunns regeneration burn closed the Bridport-to-Scottsdale road and kept children home from school.

Then-environment minister Paula Wriedt promised an investigation into the incident.

State environmental management director Warren Jones said a \$25,000 grant had just been issued to investigate whether burn-off smoke should be monitored more comprehensively.

The Environment Division has also been working with the Forest Practices Authority to develop a standard for smoke management from planned burning.

Mr Blanks said annual forestry burns needed to be kept in perspective.

"Everyone who drives a car is pumping out the same volatile organic compounds, sooty carbon and the whole box and dice but forest industry smoke columns are particularly noticeable," Mr Blanks said.

He cited State Government research that only 2 per cent of the state's annual particulate load was attributable to combined bushfires and forestry burns.