

Office of Drug Control
Department of Health
GPO Box 9848
Canberra ACT 2601

RE: Pilot Program to ease restrictions on the importation of kava for personal use.

The Directors of the Aboriginal Resource and Development Services Board met on Wednesday 13 March 2019 and resolved to provide the following comment regarding the proposed pilot of the ease of restrictions of kava.

Kava has become integrated into the lives of many people from north east Arnhem Land. There have been a number of legislative regimes, both Northern Territory and Federal government, that have impacted on their communities over the last two decades.

Despite the current restrictions, there are still significant quantities of kava being sold in these remote communities. Large profits are being made and community members use unregulated amounts of black market kava.

Most of the communities in north east Arnhem Land have chosen to be free of alcohol but they still face the issues of illegal substances including kava and cannabis.

The people of north east Arnhem Land use kava in a different way than the Pacific island peoples. The Aboriginal people have no ceremonial protocols to adhere to and unfortunately the product is often misused.

One major difference between the ceremonial use of kava and the consumption in north east Arnhem Land is that Aboriginal women are very likely to engage in heavy consumption. There are concerns that the impact of kava consumption by the mothers on unborn children and those being breastfed, is not understood.

Also children may become malnourished because a large portion of the family income may be spent on kava. When parents drink kava all night, the children are left to their own devices and are not woken for school.

People who consume large quantities of kava become lethargic and lose interest in work.

The price of a bag of kava ranges from \$50 in a community close to a regional centre to around \$150 for the same bag in a more remote community.

The potential profit margins are a forceful incentive for people to sell their kava.

The Board feels that 4kg for personal use is reasonable for those that have kava as part of their ceremonial life.

However, it is clear that kava is being sold to Aboriginal people at a significant profit. With a doubling of the amount available for personal use, the Board is concerned that this may well result in a significant increase in the amount of kava smuggled into their communities.

In regards to the evaluation of the pilot program, the Board considers it imperative that an evaluation of the impact on the communities of north east Arnhem Land be included in any evaluation of the project.

Given the secretive nature of the use of illegal kava, there will need to be a number of evaluation tools utilised. One tool will be to conduct a sensitive and confidential community survey conducted in the local language.

Two years is too long to wait for the evaluation, if as the Board fears, much larger quantities will be available in their communities as a result of the pilot project.

Therefore the Board recommends an interim review be conducted one year after the commencement of the pilot to allow for harm mitigation programs to be implemented or increased measures to ensure that on selling is restricted.

Yours Faithfully

