

It is becoming more cost effective for oil companies to import refined fuel from Asian mega-refineries, such as Reliance Industry's Jamnagar refinery or ExxonMobil's and Shell's Singapore refineries.

In light of these changes, committee chair Julie Owens (Parramatta, NSW) said it was timely for the committee to examine Australia's domestic refinery capacity, and potential impacts of declining capacity on the economy, energy security and employment.

The committee will identify the current international and domestic trends and pressures impacting on the competitiveness of Australia's domestic oil refineries, and will investigate the likely impact of declining refinery capacity in Australia.

The committee will also consider any potential issues for Australia's future energy security from possible further closures of oil refinery capacity and look at the implications of refinery closures on their workforce.

According to an Australian Strategic Policy Institute report, the fact that domestic oil refining capacity falls short of local demand means Australia is already vulnerable to any future disruption of supplies of imported petroleum during times of crisis. •

## LINKS

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**LIFETIME DAMAGE:** More education needed to cut FASD

# Action plan launched on baby alcohol disorders

## Community awareness campaigns needed.

**C**ommunity leaders and health workers have urged parliament to take action to prevent more children being born with Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD).

The Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE) launched the *Australian Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders Action Plan 2013-16* at Parliament House, presenting the plan to members of the House of Representatives Social Policy and Legal Affairs Committee, which has been inquiring into the incidence and prevention of FASD.

Brain damage caused by exposure to alcohol in the womb can lead to a range of disorders including poor memory, impaired language skills, poor impulse control and mental, social and emotional delays.

FARE's plan has called for community awareness campaigns about the dangers of alcohol during pregnancy; improved diagnostic capabilities; support for people with FASD to achieve their full potentials; improved data collection on the extent of FASD in Australia; and closing the gap on the higher prevalence of FASD among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

These recommendations were highlighted through a documentary about a young boy, Tristan, who lives with FASD at Fitzroy Crossing in Western Australia.

Bunuba community leader and chief executive of the Marninwarntikura Women's Resource Centre at Fitzroy Crossing, June Oscar said Tristan was one of many children and adults living in her community with special needs because they were exposed to alcohol before they were born.

She said since the community had started to focus on the issue, people were better educated about how to recognise FASD and how to prevent it.

"I'd like to think that our community is now much more informed. People are now sharing in discussions on this issue," Ms Oscar said. "Young people are advising each other that it's harmful to drink during pregnancy, so there is hope."

"I am very optimistic that we'll reach a point where everyone knows about this and everyone can understand those who have been exposed to alcohol in utero."

"The conditions people with FASD have throughout their lives are not just because they want to behave badly or they're doing for the heck of it – it's a condition that they have no control

## NEWS

over. And so it's in their interests and the interests of the whole community that we become better informed about FASD."

FARE said its action plan would cost \$37 million to implement, but the investment would save public money in the long run if it prevented just eight children from being born with FASD and needing the costly extra health and educational support they require.

Professor Elizabeth Elliott from Westmead Children's Hospital in Sydney has been working with the Fitzroy Crossing community on a study into FASD.

She said there was good evidence early diagnosis and special support also has positive outcomes and can save money in the public health and education systems.

"By making an early diagnosis, you can identify areas of need, such as help with literacy or help with gross motor skills," Professor Elliott said. "In studies from the US, children with FASD who were diagnosed earlier had up to four times decreased rates of secondary complications; they were more likely to be employed, less likely to use drugs and alcohol, less likely to have sexual problems, and less likely to end up in jail."

But Professor Elliott said prevention of FASD cases would be the best outcome of the inquiry and the action plan.

"The precautionary principle should be to avoid alcohol during pregnancy," she said. "We know that the mother's blood alcohol level crosses the placenta very readily, and that the baby is then exposed to the same level of alcohol. I'd feel tipsy after a bottle of wine – can you imagine what a developing foetus would feel, and what that is doing to the brain cells in a rapidly developing brain."

Professor Elliott said she wanted to stress that FASD is not just a problem in Indigenous communities.

"It's a problem across society and in fact many of our tertiary educated women are the highest drinkers. In my clinic in Sydney I don't see Indigenous children – I see non-Indigenous children from the whole spectrum of society," she said. •

## LINKS

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**FISH OUT OF WATER:** *Research gap affects fisheries management*

## Aquaculture expertise gone fishing

Inquiry hears about 70 per cent drop in research.

Scientists are finding a new species of fish in Australian waters at the rate of one per week but the work of scientifically classifying species is under threat from a decline in funding, staff and jobs, a House of Representatives inquiry has heard.

The inquiry into the science of aquaculture and fisheries by the Agriculture, Resources, Fisheries and Forestry Committee was told funding for pure scientific research has dropped by around 70 per cent.

Brian Jeffriess, Director of the Commonwealth Fisheries Association, told the inquiry this funding is being diverted to fulfil a range of obligations Australia is now required to meet.

"The requirements under the act that govern the marine environment like monitoring marine parks, climate change, oil and gas and quota monitoring – all those things are taking funding away from straight scientific research," Mr Jeffriess said.

Australia's fish fauna is one of the largest in the world with almost 5,000

species of fish known in Australian waters. The Australian Museum plays a key role in identifying and classifying these species, which research scientist Jeffrey Leis told the inquiry is crucial to fisheries management.

"In order for fisheries biologists to do their work, there has to be a proper understanding of what species they're working with," Dr Leis said. "Otherwise they risk lumping species together and not getting the fisheries management plans right."

His colleague Patricia Hutchings said this is already happening, citing the example of the Sydney fish markets.

"At any visit there are several undescribed species of octopus in the catch," Dr Hutchings said. "Some are identified and some are not, yet it is all managed as one fishery."

Dr Leis said the rising misidentification of fish species is happening in tandem with a fall in the Australian Museum's expert knowledge base. During the 1980s the museum had 11 curators whose specialty was fish. Today there are only four.