Minister for Health and Community Services, Jane Aagaard, today released details of new tobacco laws, which will come into effect in the Territory in 2003.

Mrs Aagaard said the new legislation is the most significant public health initiative in the Territory in the past decade and will address issues such as smoke free public places, discouraging people from smoking and tobacco retail licensing.

"It is estimated that tobacco consumption costs the Territory community around $60 million a year. It could however be double that when intangible costs such as welfare, absenteeism and carers are added to the equation," she said.

"Territorians have the highest smoking rates in Australia. The latest figures show 27.9% of those over the age of 14 smoke compared to the national figure of 22.5%.

"One in five Territorians die of smoking-related illness.

"Yet until now we have had the worst legislation in Australia and the Territory has long been criticised for its inaction in this area.

"The Government is committed to ensuring the health of Territorians is given the same protection as other Australians and we do all we can to stop children taking up the habit.

"The legislation is designed to reduce the long term health problems associated with smoking and bring the Territory into line with the rest of Australia."

Under the laws:

- From 1 January 2003, smoking will be prohibited in all indoor restaurants, cafes, eateries and shopping centres.

- From 31 May 2003 (World no Tobacco Day), hotels, clubs and casinos will need to provide equal amenity in bar areas. Casinos will also need to provide equal amenity in gaming areas. Hotels and clubs will be required to provide equal amenity in gaming areas where they have more than 25 gaming machines, and then only for machines in excess of 25.

Mrs Aagaard said the interpretation of equal amenity will be guided by an industry code to be co-developed by Government and the Australian Hotels Association. A panel comprising union, industry and government representatives will investigate breaches.

She said the new smoking regulations are the result of widespread community consultation with unions, the hospitality industry, and community and professional organisations such as the Cancer Council, the National Heart Foundation and the Australian Medical Association. Over 190 submissions were received with more than 90 per cent supporting change.
Mrs Aagaard said workers who are subject to environmental tobacco smoke would benefit under the new laws as will patrons to sporting and community events which have fixed seating.

Venues with fixed seating such as sports stadiums will be required to provide 50 per cent of their seating as non-smoking.

Delaying workplace restrictions, including for the hospitality industry, until 31 May 2003, will ensure all affected premises will have time to prepare for the changes.

Other venues where smoking will be prohibited on 1 January 2003, include:

- Halls and community facilities such as libraries, theatres and galleries.
- Confined areas of common access such as stairways, corridors, lobbies, waiting and ticketing areas, toilets and staff amenities in public buildings.
- Public transport such as taxis, buses, vessels and their stations and waiting areas.
- The buildings and grounds of schools and child care facilities (except where staff agree, designating an outdoor smoking area concealed from the view of children and restricted to adults.)
- Shared accommodation such as hostels and nursing homes except where rooms are shared by couples,
- Within two metres of entrances to buildings and three metres from air conditioning inlets

Mrs Aagaard said there will be a comprehensive public education campaign, including media advertising, brochures and booklets, workplace visits and face to face information sessions to inform Territorians of the new legislation prior to it becoming law.

There will also be new restrictions on the sale of tobacco aimed at restricting supply to minors, including changes to advertising and marketing and removing the ability to sell single cigarettes.

"We will also introduce a licensing system for the retailing of tobacco products. It will be fee-free but will allow close monitoring with penalties for breaches."

Mrs Aagaard said she would be writing to Territory businesses to explain the changes.

For more information visit the Health Department website at http://www.health.nt.gov.au