



Hon Bill Byrne MP
Minister for Agriculture and Fisheries and
Minister for Rural Economic Development

Reference: CTS 10635/17

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Committee Secretary
Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee
Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Committee Secretary

Thank you for your letter of 13 February 2017 regarding the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee Inquiry into the *Impact of defence training activities and facilities on rural and regional communities*.

The Federal Government's Defence portfolio maintains a strong and valued presence in Queensland through a number of long standing Defence facilities and assets. The impact of Defence training activities, facilities and assets on rural and regional communities within Queensland is largely positive, and I particularly acknowledge the support that Defence personnel provide in rural and regional communities during times of crisis, including the recent Severe Tropical Cyclone Debbie.

As part of the Advance Queensland Program, defence and aerospace are two of the six industry sectors identified as emerging priority industries to be supported by the Queensland Government to build their competitive strengths, and create the knowledge-based jobs of the future. The Queensland Government places an emphasis on developing and promoting commercial opportunities in partnership with the Defence sector, with a specific focus on local service providers and suppliers. Specific aspects of defence initiatives as they relate to the review are included at Attachment 1.

There have recently been two major issues related to Defence training activities and facilities that have created concern within rural and regional communities of Queensland.

The proposed compulsory acquisition of land for expansion of the Townsville and Shoalwater Bay Field Training Areas, caused a high level of concern in the communities of northern and central Queensland in late 2016 and early 2017.

As the Queensland Member of Parliament for Rockhampton, I was closely involved with supporting the community impacted by the proposed expansion of the Shoalwater Bay Training Area. The consultation and communication process followed by the Federal Government with regard to the timing and manner of information provision to impacted landholders was poor and it caused considerable emotional distress.

The announcement by the Federal Government that compulsory land acquisitions would be dropped in favour of a voluntary process has alleviated many of the immediate concerns from the community. The Queensland Government continues to seek information to quantify the potential social, economic and environmental impacts to these regions and continues to provide support to the impacted communities by:

- providing counselling and emotional support through Relationships Australia Queensland, to as many as 50 families, property owners, lease holders and business owners in and around Marlborough, Ogmoo and Stanage
- commissioned an independent study to assess the impacts of military training area expansions on the beef supply chain, which found that 355 814 hectares of agricultural land could be lost to the beef industry along with 51 970 – 78 329 head of cattle, with an estimated sale market value of between \$13 million – 19 million (Attachment 2)
- requesting the Federal Government undertakes an appropriate assessment to minimise environmental impacts, including impacts on the Shoalwater Bay and Bukkulla Conservation Parks and Mount O'Connell National Park, and the potential isolation of the Charon Point Conservation Park. The site is one of only five internationally recognised wetland sites (Ramsar Convention) for Queensland and also contributes to the values of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area. Any activities which may affect the ecological character of the site would be subject to assessment under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (Cwth)*. Any potential change in the ecological character of the site would need to be referred to the international Ramsar Secretariat, and could lead to claims that Queensland or Australia appears not to be adequately upholding international obligations.

A level of uncertainty still remains for landholders and local communities neighbouring the Townsville and Shoalwater Bay Field Training Areas. Future efforts and investment by Defence must have due regard for the unique socio-economic and environmental values and development aspirations of both regions.

The second issue causing community concern is the poly-fluoroalkyl substance (PFAS) contamination at the Army Aviation Centre Oakey and RAAF Bases Amberley and Townsville, where it has been confirmed that the historical use and storage of fire retardants has left residual contamination of PFAS in the soil, surface and groundwater, and that there are credible pathways for the movement of contamination off-base.

Concerns have been raised by landholders living and operating businesses in areas where contamination is confirmed. It is acknowledged that Defence has taken appropriate steps to inform impacted communities and minimise risks to human health.

From an agricultural perspective, there is no current evidence to suggest that PFAS has a detrimental effect on animal or plant health at levels likely to be found at contaminated sites. Human Health Risk assessments conducted at Oakey have concluded that risks to the health of the general population are low and acceptable. As such, there are currently no restrictions in place in Queensland on the sale or movement of plant or animal products, produced in areas affected by PFAS contamination.

There has been a negative impact on land values and the psychological well-being of residents in affected areas. There is also a risk of reputational damage to food production industries in these areas.

The Queensland Government acts in accordance with relevant policy and legislation, and awaits the results and recommendations of more detailed environmental investigations, currently being undertaken at RAAF Bases Amberley and Townsville. The Queensland Government also looks forward to Defence providing further support for affected primary producers and other community members in the Oakey area.

The Queensland Government is committed to working in close partnership with the Department of Defence to maximise socio-economic and environmental outcomes for rural and regional communities within Queensland.

If you require any further information regarding this matter, please contact Mr Elton Miller, Executive Director, Rural Economic Development, Department of Agriculture and Fisheries on

Yours sincerely

The Honourable Bill Byrne MP
Minister for Agriculture and Fisheries and
Minister for Rural Economic Development
Member for Rockhampton

Cc The Honourable Anastacia Palaszczuk MP
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Copy for your information.

Att (2)