



The Hon Alan Griffin MP
Minister for Veterans' Affairs
Federal Member for Bruce

Mrs Julia Irwin MP
Chair
Standing Committee on Petitions
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Mrs Irwin *Julia*

Thank you for your letter of 26 November 2008 concerning my response to the Petition lodged with the Standing Committee in June 2008 regarding maintenance of the historic Wells site at Be'er-Sheva, Israel.

My Department provided a response to the Petition to your Committee on 23 September, with the approval of my office. I regret this delay in formalising this portfolio's formal response to the Petition, but I am pleased that Departmental staff were able to attend the public hearing conducted on 24 September to answer further questions.

In accordance with Committee requirements, I enclose a copy of that response.

I trust this meets all required procedures relating to this matter.

Yours sincerely

Alan Griffin

Encl

22 DEC 2008

Restoration of the Wells at Be'er-Sheva, Israel

The issue of the condition of the wells was raised prior to the dedication of the *Park of the Australian Soldier*, on 28 April 2008, by Mr Leon Bignell MHA, South Australian Member for Mawson, and Mr Steve Herbert MLA, Victorian Member for Eltham. At the request of the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA), the Australian Ambassador to Israel, Mr James Larsen, met with the Mayor of Be'er-Sheva and requested that everything possible be done to maintain the wells in an orderly state. The Mayor advised that the wells were at that time clear from rubbish and would be included in an ongoing revitalisation project for the river and surrounding areas which will ensure that the wells are kept in a satisfactory condition in the future. The Ambassador inspected the site and confirmed that it was free from rubbish. The Israeli Embassy in Canberra advised DVA it was also in touch with authorities in Israel concerning the condition of the wells.

The wells at Be'er sheva are located in an unpopulated area south of the city. Prevailing winds from the Negev Desert make the task of maintaining the wells difficult and they are often strewn with rubbish from the nearby markets.

The *Park of the Australian Soldier* incorporates nine explanatory panels in English, Hebrew and Arabic that explain the significance of the battle in 1917, and the Australian involvement in the Second World War and peace operations in the area.

At the time of the Park dedication, the Minister for Veterans' Affairs, together with LTGEN David Hurley AO DSC, then Chief of Joint Operations, representing the Chief of the Australian Defence Force, launched a project entitled *Anzac Trail* at Bet Eshel, (near the site of the 1917 charge). The *Anzac Trail* is an initiative of the Jewish National Fund (JNF) of Australia and will provide a route through the northern Negev tracing the course taken by Anzac troops. The project includes the development of sites and points of historical, cultural and ecological interest along the route, including with the city of Be'er Sheva. The complete length of the route is approximately 60 kilometres and will include detailed signs, trail markings, shaded areas, benches, and bicycle and audio stations.

The Department is currently seeking assistance from the Australian Embassy in Israel regarding progress of the trail.