



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Official Committee Hansard

JOINT COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC WORKS

Reference: Infrastructure to support proposed space centre on Christmas Island

THURSDAY, 27 SEPTEMBER 2001

CANBERRA

BY AUTHORITY OF THE PARLIAMENT

JOINT COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC WORKS

Thursday, 27 September 2001

Members: Mrs Moylan (*Chair*), Senators Calvert, Ferguson and Murphy and Mrs Crosio, Mr Forrest, Mr Hollis, Mr Lindsay and Mr Ripoll

Senators and members in attendance: Senator Calvert and Mrs Crosio, Mr Forrest, Mr Hollis, Mr Lindsay, Mrs Moylan and Mr Ripoll

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

Infrastructure to support proposed space centre on Christmas Island

WITNESSES

MOORE, Mr Hugh, Director, Asset Management and Financial Services, Territories and Regional Support Division, Department of Transport and Regional Services..... 1

MRDAK, Mr Michael, First Assistant Secretary, Territories and Regional Support Division, Department of Transport and Regional Services 1

WEATHERSTONE, Mr John, Assistant Director, Department of Transport and Regional Services 1

Committee met at 8.48 a.m.**MRDAK, Mr Michael, First Assistant Secretary, Territories and Regional Support Division, Department of Transport and Regional Services****MOORE, Mr Hugh, Director, Asset Management and Financial Services, Territories and Regional Support Division, Department of Transport and Regional Services****WEATHERSTONE, Mr John, Assistant Director, Department of Transport and Regional Services**

CHAIR—Welcome. We have met you before so we are going to let you go straight into your briefing. Then we will probably have some questions.

Mr Mrdak—In the middle of this year the government announced its intention to provide some infrastructure support for the proposed Christmas Island spaceport facility. The department has been tasked with developing three common-use infrastructure projects for the island estimated to have a total cost of \$68.6 million. That will include an extension to the airport runway and additional apron and pavement works at the airport to be able to support operations by large aircraft such as B747 freight aircraft. There will be an alternate port facility on the eastern side of the island to provide year-round port facilities to overcome one of the longstanding problems for the island, and also an access road from the new port up to the main part of the island and the airport. They are the three infrastructure projects.

As you have seen from our referral, we are working to a very tight time frame. The space centre proponents are looking to have the space centre facility operational by the end of 2003. They have indicated to the government that they are looking to operate commercial space launches from that time. Accordingly, our infrastructure needs to be in place to provide support for those launches because much of the satellite technology is intended to arrive on the island by large freight aircraft. We are looking for the committee's consideration of this matter.

As we have indicated in our preliminary documentation, we are seeking the committee's consideration even though we are still at the very early stages of our technical design work. We are also seeking the committee's agreement that we continue our design and environmental studies work concurrent with the committee's consideration of this matter. This is a little bit unusual but by the same token it is necessary because of the tight timeframes to which the spaceport project is working and the government's commitment to it.

Mr FORREST—There is a fair bit of environmental work required, isn't there? It is a pretty sensitive island. Is all that done?

Mr Mrdak—It will need to be done. We are doing that at the moment. We have lodged referrals with Environment Australia under the EPBC Act. Minister Hill has now advised us that all three projects will be controlled actions and we are now preparing formal advice to them in relation to what level of environmental assessment we will need to undertake. We consider that much of work at the airport will be over areas which are already highly disturbed—old diggings and the like. We probably have not presented the environmental issues in terms of the airport and the port, but we certainly have recognised the Linkwater Road upgrade does skirt around the edge of the national park and we will have some issues in relation to threatened

species. We do expect quite a deal of environmental assessment required on the road access, potentially less on the other two, but we are yet to get a final decision from Minister Hill on those.

Mr LINDSAY—Between now and a possible hearing of the PWC in, say, March next year, how much money do you expect to spend?

Mr Moore—We have a schedule and if we work according to the schedule, it could be in the order of about \$3 million on detailed design documentation and environmental work.

Mr LINDSAY—In relation to other common use infrastructure, for example water supply or telecommunications, is there no intention to provide that or is it provided by others?

Mr Mrdak—At this stage, the assessment is that the island's infrastructure is capable of handling an increase in population to cater for the space centre. For the things that are related to but outside the space centre, such as electricity and water supply for the areas they need, that will be part of their development and will not be provided by the Commonwealth. So at this stage the only additional infrastructure which the Commonwealth is providing is these three projects.

Mr LINDSAY—In relation to the extension of the runway, which way does it go? If you are standing in the terminal looking out towards the runway, is it extended to the left or the right?

Mr Moore—To your right.

Mr Weatherstone—It is to the south.

Mr LINDSAY—Does that also mean a widening of the runway as well as an extension of the runway?

Mr Moore—It is not a widening of the runway itself; it is a widening of the shoulders. You need to have strength in the shoulders because of the wider-bodied aircraft that are going to land.

Mr Weatherstone—The current width is sufficient at 48 metres or whatever the required width is for 747s.

Mr LINDSAY—But it does need strengthening?

Mr Moore—Yes.

Mrs CROSIO—I want to follow up on one answer that you gave Mr Forrest: you said that you will not require an environmental impact statement, or whatever; you will only need it for the road or the surrounding areas. But you are putting in a new port.

Mr Mrdak—What I was suggesting is that we were hopeful that we will not need to go to a full EIS for the port and the airport given that they may have less environmental impact than the

road project. But I have not received a final decision from Minister Hill on that. That is only our view based on the preliminary assessments we have done to date.

Mrs CROSIO—But there is no port established there at all where you are going to build this new one, is there?

Mr Mrdak—No, that is right. Our consultant's view is that it is an area of relatively low environmental value in terms of the area where the port will be located. So while we expect that there will need to be some preliminary assessment or some environmental assessment, we are expecting that we may not need to do a full EIS as we would for some more threatened areas of the island.

Mrs CROSIO—In a case like that, and you may or may not have the answer, when you are building a new port in a different location, you realise that your environmental study is done on the land as well as the detrimental effect it has into the sea?

Mr Mrdak—Yes.

Mr Moore—When we say it is an additional port, it is an additional port facility. It does not involve any significant digging up of the land. It is a pile structure that will sit out from the edge of the cliff. There will be relatively minimal impact on the seaside. The only impact will be a mooring buoy out in the sea, because the same system will be used for this port as with the existing port whereby we have barges—

Mrs CROSIO—Barges loading?

Mr Moore—Yes, which come in close. So it is basically a piled structure with a crane and a hard stand on the top of the cliff.

Mr Weatherstone—The other thing too is that it is within the current port precinct.

Mrs CROSIO—Fair enough.

Mr Mrdak—While at this stage we do not have a firm decision from Minister Hill, based on the preliminary assessment that has been done to date we do not anticipate major environmental issues in relation to the airport and the port, but again that is a final decision that will be taken by Minister Hill as to what degree of environmental assessment we will need to do.

Mr FORREST—That is the side of the island though where the crabs migrate though, isn't it? I think there was an issue with the resort when it was there.

Mr Moore—The crabs migrate on all of the sides of the island. They tend to come from the top and go to the sea, and there are a number of major migration routes, and that area is an area where there is significant migration. There is a significant migration route over near the school as well. The existing road already cuts the migration route. This does not involve any new roads, it involves only use of existing routes, reconstruction and alignment of an existing road. In that process we will be looking at crab crossing issues.

Mr FORREST—Culverts under the road.

Mr Weatherstone—One of the issues that came up on the island recently was that very issue about crab migration, and we were informed that the crabs actually do not go across the road; they actually run down the length of the road. So that that is one of the issues that will be taken into consideration in the design of that road.

Mr Moore—We have to capture them and divert them.

Mr FORREST—There was a big issue with the road that was cut to come into the resort from the top.

Mr Moore—We have crab crossings in there—we developed it as a prototype and we would be looking—

CHAIR—What is a crab crossing?

Mr Weatherstone—A tunnel underneath.

Mr HOLLIS—Crabs cross here.

Mr Weatherstone—With the crabs crossing—

Mrs CROSIO—They usually provide an escalator as they go from one end—.

CHAIR—I was going to say, ‘Why don’t we do a little tunnel and make into a tourist venture?’

Mr Weatherstone—We do, but the difficulty is you cannot have a tunnel—

CHAIR—They will not go under the tunnel.

Mr Weatherstone—They use the stars as their guide, so you have got to have a clear path.

CHAIR—You have to have a bridge then.

Mr Weatherstone—You have got to have a grate like a cattle grid type grate.

Mr FORREST—It had to be a grate so they could look at the stars. It is quite incredible.

Mr Moore—And you need the side of the road to have culverts to catch them to funnel them into—

Mr Weatherstone—They cannot climb up.

Mr Moore—Otherwise they will just go straight over.

Mr FORREST—Incredible really.

Mr Weatherstone—That is part of the documentation and design work that will be taken into consideration.

Mrs CROSIO—They are not big enough to eat either are they? They are only those small soldier type crabs.

Mr Weatherstone—They are quite big.

Mr FORREST—They know all about Pythagoras.

CHAIR—Thank you very much.

Private briefing concluded at 8.57 a.m.