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7 October 2011

House Standing Committee on Regional Australia
House of Representatives
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

To Whom It May Concern

RE: INQUIRY INTO FLY-IN, FLY-OUT / DRIVE-IN, DRIVE-OUT MINING OPERATIONS IN REGIONAL AUSTRALIA

Please find attached a joint submission made by the Shire of Ashburton and the Shire of East Pilbara, Western Australia, in relation to FIFO workforces in remote regions of Australia.

Yours faithfully

Jeff Breen
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER
SHIRE OF ASHBURTON

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THE HEART
OF THE
PILBARA



7 October 2011

Our Ref: ADM14-1: AC/sp
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Record No: OCR11-8428

House Standing Committee on Regional Australia
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INQUIRY INTO FLY-IN, FLY-OUT/DRIVE-IN, DRIVE-OUT MINING OPERATIONS IN REGIONAL AUSTRALIA

A joint submission to the House of Representative's Standing Committee on Regional Australia, by the Shire of Ashburton and Shire of East Pilbara, Western Australia.

Executive Summary

The Shire of Ashburton (SOA) and Shire of East Pilbara (SOEP) jointly submit the following comments to the House of Representative's Standing Committee on Regional Australia, in response to its request for submissions to the "Inquiry into Fly-In, Fly-Out/Drive-In, Drive-Out Mining Operations in Regional Australia".

Background to Shires making submission.

- *The SOA and SOEP are two of the four local governments which make up the Pilbara region, Western Australia. The two shires, which share common goals and face many similar issues in their daily operations, account for 95% of the Pilbara land mass.*
- *The economic base of both shires is significant, both in state and national terms, due to the fact that the two shires collectively contain Australia's "main iron ore mining province", Their economic importance will be further enhanced by the construction of two Liquefied Natural Gas plants within their boundaries.*
- *The two shires have a total, permanent population of 18,000, which is dwarfed by a Fly In – Fly Out (FIFO) workforce (operational and construction) of 29,000. This latter figure is to increase by a further 16,000 to 45,000, in the near future, due to the commencement of major projects, which have received proponent approval.*
- *While the intense natural resource activity within the two shires is of significant state and national benefit, the shires do not similarly benefit, partly because of the additional pressures placed on local government services and infrastructure by FIFO workforces.*
- *Also, the shires' rate bases do not fully benefit due to early agreements between the State government and the major resource companies being covered by "state agreements", which preclude local government from effectively rating many of the major resource projects.*

Details of Submission

- *Existing planning, for the impact of FIFO workforces, by the State Government and the resource industry is severely compromised by grossly inaccurate Australian Bureau of Statistics population data, which underestimates the permanent population in the region by approximately 20%.*
- *Similarly, State and resource industry FIFO workforce projections for the Pilbara, for up until 2020 are unrealistically low and fail to reflect the existing level of FIFO*

activity in the region State government and the resource industry estimate that in 2010 there were 35,500 FIFO workers (operational and construction) in the region whereas the four local governments have issued 55,000 building licences for FIFO beds.

- *Local government has little opportunity to participate in planning for the impact of FIFO workforces. That role rests with the State government and the resource industry itself. There is, however, no state nor regional plan to guide development.*
- *Local governments experience pressures on their ability to provide traditional community services as a result of the influx of FIFO workforces. This can occur as a result of loading on the local government services themselves, or funding issues. Alternatively, FIFO activity can place pressure on utilities such as reticulated water, to the detriment of local government operated, community facilities.*
- *The proliferation of FIFO in a community can have an extremely detrimental impact on local housing markets, particularly when resource based, associated service businesses operate on the FIFO model.*
- *Many permanent residents, who do not have the benefit of a resource based income, are unable to pay the high rentals resulting from FIFO staff competing in the domestic housing market and are therefore forced to leave their community.*
- *Local small businesses and other local employers (including local government), who have traditionally been required to provide staff housing, are unable to compete in local rental markets due to prices paid by resource based businesses with FIFO staff.*
- *Accommodation price pressures resulting from traditional tourist accommodation being used by FIFO workers, have drastically reduced the financial viability of the tourism industry in the Pilbara.*
- *Local communities are deprived of many of the services and trades which would be normally be found in communities of comparable size due to service trades and businesses servicing the resource industry operating FIFO operations.*
- *The introduction of FIFO workforces has severely undermined the local communities' ability to maintain strong sporting and community organisations.*
- *There is only limited opportunity available to local government in Western Australia to influence the impact of FIFO, particularly in a regulatory sense. Reasons for this include mining legislation over-riding planning legislation and the existence of many "State Agreements" which limit input from local government to "consultation".*
- *The SOA and SOEP recognise that there are circumstances where FIFO is necessary. This includes during the construction of major projects and when resource projects are in isolated locations or have a limited life.*
- *The SOA & SOEP advocate changes to the Australian Taxation Zone Rebate by increasing its size and limiting those who can claim it to residents of remote regions.*
- *Pilbara local governments have been proactive in increasing the availability of residential land within existing towns. This work is often handicapped, however, by the inability of state and private utility providers to supply services.*

- *The Pilbara shires have attempted to ameliorate some of the worst aspects of poor urban design resulting from the use of “dongas” and similar structures by means of planning policies and negotiation. The objective has been to achieve a mixture of accommodation styles, which are compatible with existing residential development and which offer a higher level of amenity.*

- *The SOA and SOEP believe that there is a role for the Commonwealth government to assist with addressing some of the outstanding issues, associated with FIFO workforces, in particular it is proposed.*
 1. *The Commonwealth government require the Australian Bureau of Statistics to address those systemic issues within the organisation which result in it under enumerating permanent populations in remote regions of the country; and*
 2. *The Commonwealth government amend the criteria applying to the Australian Taxation Zone Rebate, in order to direct increased benefits to those living permanently in remote areas and that it not be a benefit FIFO workers.*

Introduction

On 23 August 2011 the Minister for Regional Australia, Regional Development and Local Government, the Honourable Simon Crean, MP, asked the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Regional Australia to inquire into and report on the use of, “*fly-in, fly-out (FIFO) and drive-in, drive-out (DIDO) workforce practices in Regional Australia*”.

The Standing Committee’s terms of reference is to report on FIFO and DIDO, with specific reference to

- *costs and benefits for companies, and individuals, choosing a FIFO/DIDO workforce as an alternative to a resident workforce;*
- *the effect of a non-resident FIFO/DIDO workforce on established communities, including community wellbeing, services and infrastructure;*
- *the impact on communities sending large numbers of FIFO/DIDO workers to mine sites;*
- *long term strategies for economic diversification in towns with large FIFO/DIDO workforces;*
- *key skill sets targeted for mobile workforce employment, and opportunities for ongoing training and development;*
- *provision of services, infrastructure and housing availability for FIFO/DIDO workforce employees;*
- *strategies to optimise FIFO/DIDO experience for employees and their families, communities and industry;*
- *potential opportunities for non-mining communities with narrow economic bases to diversify their economic base by providing a FIFO/DIDO workforce;*
- *current initiatives and responses of the Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments; and*
- *any other related matter.*

This submission is made jointly by the Shire of Ashburton (SOA) and Shire of East Pilbara) (SOEP) in response to the House of Representatives Committee’s request for submissions.

The shires submit that their comments are particularly valid as the two local governments account for much of the land mass of the resource rich Pilbara region of Western Australia.

The National Economic Importance of Western Australia’s Pilbara Region

The Pilbara region is located in the north of Western Australia. It is bound by the Kimberley region to the north, the Indian Ocean to the west and the Northern Territory in the east. The region is 507 896 square kilometres in area.

The Pilbara is of great economic significance to the nation with an economy dominated by the extraction, processing and export of minerals and hydrocarbons.

The Pilbara produces approximately:

- 95% of Australia's iron ore
- 70% Australia's natural gas
- 85% of Australia's crude oil and condensate (*Western Australian Mineral and Petroleum Statistical Digest 2010*)

The 2010 value of Pilbara minerals and petroleum exports was AU\$48.9b. This figure has increased massively since 1999/2000 when exports were AU\$4.1b. The Pilbara also services the offshore Carnarvon Basin, Australia's largest known oil and gas reserve which earned AU\$22.8b (21% WA total mineral's and petroleum value) in 2010.

The Pilbara accounts for 53% of WA's mineral and petroleum production value. (*Source Pilbara Futures Presentation 2011 prepared by Pilbara Development Commission*)

The region supports a permanent population base of approximately 57,000. Local governments in the region are, however, subject to the unique pressures generated by an extremely large Fly-In Fly-Out (FIFO) workforce, in addition to the permanent population. It is estimated, based on building licence approvals, that there are presently 55,000 FIFO beds in the region.

Introduction to Shire of Ashburton and Shire of East Pilbara

The Shire of Ashburton and the Shire of East Pilbara are neighbouring shires in the Pilbara region of the State. Collectively they cover a total area of 485,200 square kilometres, which is 95 percent of the total land mass of the Pilbara.

The two shires share common goals and face many similar issues in their daily operations. Many of the latter are the result of the shires' size and isolation.

The economic base of both shires is significant, both in state and national terms. A major reason for this is the fact that the two shires collectively contain Australia's "main iron ore mining province", which is dominated by large mines operated by BHP, Rio Tinto and the Fortescue Metals Group.

The national economic significance of the joint submitters will be further enhanced in the near future, when construction of the Gorgon Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) plant, as well as the recently approved Wheatstone LNG project, is completed on the coast of the Shire of Ashburton.

The extensive natural resource activity within the two shires means that the combined permanent population of 18,000 residents living in the two shires (11,000 residents in the SOEP and 7,000 residents in the SOA) is greatly exceeded by the 29,000 Fly In – Fly Out (FIFO) workers (operational and construction)(15,000 FIFO workers in SOEP and 14,000 FIFO workers in SOA), who work within the two local government areas.

Committed resource projects, which have not yet been commenced, will increase the number of FIFO workers by at least a further 16,000 in the immediate future (10,000 in SOEP and 6,000 in SOA).

While the intense natural resource activity within the two shires is of significant state and national benefit, the shires do not similarly benefit from this activity. This is partly due to the combined effects of additional pressures placed on local government services and infrastructure by FIFO workforces.

It is also the result of the shires' rate bases not reflecting a commensurate increase in income due to early commercial agreements between the State government and the major resource companies being enshrouded in statute by means of "state agreements", which preclude local government from effectively rating many of the major resource projects.

Shires' Submission

The SOA and SOEP submit the following comments for consideration by the House of Representative's Standing Committee on Regional Australia, in relation to its inquiry into FIFO/DIDO workforces in Regional Australia.

The comments are made in recognition of the fact the introduction of FIFO workforces into the Pilbara has had far reaching effects on local communities in the Pilbara, generally, and the two shires, in particular. In almost every case these effects have been to the detriment of local, permanent residents and the local businesses serving them.

Some of the more obvious issues, which have arisen as a result of the growth of FIFO workforces in the Pilbara region, include the following;

Planning Framework for FIFO in Western Australia is not soundly based

Many of the adverse impacts of FIFO within Western Australian, generally, and the Pilbara, in particular, can be attributed to the basic failure of both the State government and the resource companies to adequately plan for the explosive growth in the size of the FIFO workforce. More specifically, the following planning failures have occurred;

Failure to establish "existing conditions"

For many years now regional local governments in Western Australia have identified gross errors in Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) census data, in particular, the frequent under enumeration of population numbers (often by 20 to 25%).

The consequences of this under enumeration in the Pilbara are apparent when the ABS's 2008 estimate of the Pilbara's permanent residential population of 45,000 people, is compared with the current total population of 57,000, as established by the four Pilbara local governments.

Despite the vigorous endeavours of regional local governments (including SOA and SOEP) to have these errors addressed, both State and Commonwealth agencies have slavishly adhered to the Bureau's data. For example, the State agency, the Pilbara Development Commission (PDC), as recently as 2011 stated "*The estimated resident population of the Pilbara Region in 2009 was 47 528...*" (page 2, *Pilbara . A Region in Profile, 2011, PDC*).

The ABS's failure to correct these "low population counts" has been to the significant detriment of many local governments, including the SOA and SOEP, which have seen their Commonwealth Financial Assistance Grants (FAGs) suffer as a result of incorrect population data being used in their calculation.

This reduction in FAG funding has contributed, in part, to the difficulties faced by the SOA and SOEP in maintaining existing infrastructure and meeting the demand for new services.

Failure to prepare credible FIFO population projections

The Western Australian State Government's planning for FIFO related matters in the Pilbara has been strongly influenced by the activities of the Pilbara Industry's Community Council (PICC).

PICC is a committee consisting of State government agency representatives and representatives from the major resource companies, with minimal representation from local government. In 2008 PICC commissioned a study by Heuris Partners Ltd, (Heuris) to establish the level of resource activity in the Pilbara up until 2020 and also project the likely workforce and population outcomes.

Despite local government voicing significant concerns over the "Heuris" projections, the Western Australian Planning Commission (WAPC) adopted the report's FIFO projections, for state planning purposes. (*Page 5 Planning for Resources Growth in the Pilbara: revised employment & population projections to 2020. Report prepared for Pilbara Industry's Community Council,, Heuris Partners Ltd April 2010*).

It is clear that even PICC had concerns about the FIFO projections adopted by the State government in November 2008 and for this reason the committee engaged Heuris Partners Ltd to update that company's projections. The result is the "Heuris" report dated April 2010.

That report established that the FIFO figures being used by the Western Australian Planning Commission were, after 18 months of their adoption were understated by 20% for 2010, 60% understated for 2015 and 90% understated for 2020 (*Fig 4 Heuris April 2010.*)

Equally disturbingly, a review of the 2010 Heuris calculations indicates that in 2010 there were estimated to be 35,500 FIFO workers (operational and construction) in the region and this was projected to increase to 48,500 by 2015 (*Figs 5 & 7 Heuris April 2010*)

In fact, there are presently 55,000 Transient Workers Accommodation beds available for FIFO workers (operational and construction) within the four local governments that make up the Pilbara region (as determined by building licences issued). Furthermore, the four local governments are presently in various stages of discussions in relation to another 32,000 beds relating to committed resource projects, which will constructed over the next two to three years.

In summary, it is clear that both the Western Australian State government and the resource industry are being guided in their planning by data which significantly understates both existing and projected levels of FIFO activity.

Failure to establish a Strategic Planning Framework

The infrastructure and social impacts on existing communities in the Pilbara, of FIFO workforces generated by new resource projects are considered in an ad hoc manner, if they are considered at all.

In the absence of any State or regional strategy relating to the growth FIFO workforce numbers, local government is most often reduced to “making comment” on projects at short notice. This is a process which totally undermines local governments’ attempts to operate within the framework of their own, longer term strategic plans.

Adverse Impact of FIFO on demand for Local Government Services

Traditionally local governments have planned infrastructure and services on the basis of the needs of their permanent residents. The imposing of FIFO workforces on such facilities (usually at extremely short notice) can place an unexpected, but significant additional loads on the local government services. Furthermore, this often occurs without the local government being able to recoup the additional ongoing costs incurred due to the extremely favourable “Rating regimes” which apply to many resource projects (see comments below).

These additional pressures can, for example, be due to the increased patronage of sporting, recreational and community facilities. By way of example, it is noted that many FIFO workers are avid participants in informal sporting activities on local government managed reserves and parks. This high level of usage, combined with the extreme climatic conditions experienced in the Pilbara, makes sports ground maintenance an area of significant local government cost.

Other adverse impacts of FIFO workforces on local government operations can be less direct, but just as significant. For example, the additional load placed on utilities by town based FIFO workforces, can severely limit the availability of basic services such as reticulated water and electricity to existing town.

The Shires making this submission have experienced this first hand. One more recent example has been the case of the Shire having to install a self-contained fire fighting system for a newly constructed emergency evacuation centre/recreation centre (the Pilbara is prone to cyclone activity), at a cost in excess of \$300,000, due to recent resource activity overloading an inadequate local reticulated water supply.

Isolated FIFO camps can even generate additional local government costs as workers are bused to and from local airports along local roads, which were not designed, nor built for such activity.

Adverse Impact of FIFO on Local Housing Markets

The proliferation of FIFO in a community can have an extremely detrimental impact on local housing markets, even when the main mine workforce is accommodated in transient workforce accommodation. This situation arises as a result of many resource companies making no provision to accommodate FIFO workforces associated with independent operators servicing their resource operation.

It is the norm for resource companies to underprovide accommodation for their staff when their project is located near an existing town.

This often results in mine related services industries renting housing in local communities and using it for short stay accommodation for groups of staff members.

The impact of these arrangements can be dramatic and to the severe detriment of the local community. For example, the town of Onslow, within the SOA has experienced an explosion in average housing rentals from approximately \$350 per week to \$2000 per week over a three year period as a result of approximately 10% of the town's total housing stock being lost to the local community.

One outcome of this "take-up" of local housing stock by resource related companies, with FIFO workforces, is that owners of rental homes are loath to enter into long-term leases with traditional renters. Instead, they remove their property from the domestic housing market and make it available to FIFO workers.

This in turn, places significant upward cost pressures on the remaining rental housing stock. Many permanent residents, who do not have the benefit of a resource based income, are unable to pay the high rentals and are therefore forced to leave the community.

Adverse Impact of FIFO on Local, Non Resource Based Employers

A further adverse outcome of reduced rental housing stock is its impact on local employers who are not directly related to the resource industries.

Traditionally the operators of many businesses in the Pilbara have been required to provide rental accommodation for their staff members. This affects many small business operators, including retailers, and even local government itself. These employers are required to determine whether a new employee can justify his or her position when the position comes with the extra cost of \$1500-\$2000 per week for common rental accommodation.

It is very seldom that a local employer, has both the financial resources and can justify such expenditure. Even when he or she can, there is the practical problem of finding a vacant dwelling.

Adverse Impact of FIFO on Tourist Industry

The Pilbara region is an area of great scenic beauty which has traditionally attracted a significant tourist base. In recent years however, the tourism industry has struggled to maintain its level of activity as a result of a severe shortage of tourist accommodation.

In a number of cases accommodation facilities, which were privately operated and were available to the tourist industry, have been purchased by resource companies and converted to transient workers accommodation. Even when ownership of facilities has remained independent, price pressures have drastically reduced the financial viability of the tourism industry.

Adverse Impact of FIFO on Local Service Industries

FIFO based resource operations are usually accompanied by FIFO trade and service industries.

These arrangements operate to the severe detriment of local residential communities. More specifically the FIFO services (eg. electricians and refrigeration

engineers) are restricted in their operations to the resource operations and are not available to the general population. Furthermore, potential, locally based services which do not have access to resource based work are unable to survive servicing the domestic market alone. Often, the result is local communities are deprived of many of the services and trades which would normally be found in communities of comparable size.

Adverse Impact of FIFO on Local Community and Sporting Activities

Before FIFO came the dominant activity it has become, local sporting and recreational clubs and community groups in the Pilbara flourished with strong membership numbers and committed management committees.

The introduction of FIFO has severely undermined this positive sign of community health.

This has occurred for two reasons. Firstly the transient nature of a FIFO workforce means that there is less desire on the part of FIFO workers to participate in a community in which they see themselves a visitor for work purposes. Secondly, by their nature most competitive sporting activities require a scheduled competition spread over an extended season. This is inconsistent with the work schedules of FIFO workers who do not work on the basis of the traditional week. For this reason it is difficult to develop and maintain a sense of team spirit when team members are changing week by week.

The direct outcome of these difficulties faced by community and sporting clubs is that many disband, or they struggle to maintain an existence.

The four Pilbara local governments have proactively attempted (both individually and collectively) to ameliorate the more drastic impacts that FIFO has had on the communities in the region. Unfortunately, there is only limited opportunity available to the third level of government to influence the impact of FIFO, particularly in regulatory sense. Reasons for this include;

- Section 120 of the *Western Australia Mining Act 1976* limits the authority of local government based town planning schemes, (although there is significant debate as to precise limits imposed by this particular legislation).
- The operators of most of the more major and established resource projects, particularly those relating to iron ore and natural gas (both of whom are major employers), have entered into agreements with State government of Western Australia and those agreements are enshrined in statute (ie "State Agreements"). These pieces of legislation often limit local government input to planning processes to little more than consultation.
- In many cases, the "State Agreements" referred to above limit, or restrict completely, the ability of local governments to collect anything other than minimal "Unimproved Value" (UV) rates, of operations which are internationally commercially significant.

The SOA and SOEP note that none of the local governments which make up the Pilbara, absolutely oppose FIFO arrangements.

It is recognised that there is a legitimate need, in certain circumstances, for such work force arrangements. Obvious examples of this include accommodation arrangements for major

construction projects. Similarly, FIFO is legitimate on resource sites, which are isolated or have extremely limited operational lives.

The endeavours of local government in the Pilbara to lessen the more adverse impacts of FIFO on local communities have included the following;

Advocating Modifications to the Australian Taxation Zone Rebate

The shires strongly advocate changes to the Australian Taxation Zone Rebate.

This personal tax offset was introduced to offset the higher cost of living for permanent residents in remote regions. The conditions for claiming this allowance, however, are such that a regular FIFO worker, based in a main centre, can almost always claim the rebate despite him or her not incurring any of the higher costs associated with living in a remote region due to the fact that their daily accommodation, food and transport expenses are met by the employer.

The SOA and SOEP are of the opinion that this is inequitable. An increased rebate which is available only to permanent residents, and not FIFO workers, would be of some assistance in making remote regions more attractive to permanent residents.

Improving the Availability of Serviced Residential Land

Resource companies often argue that there is no option to FIFO due to the fact that there is a lack of serviced, residential land in nearby towns.

Pilbara local governments have been particularly proactive in attempting to address these land shortages, either by individually undertaking the necessary works or working in partnership with the State government's property development arm, Landcorp.

In many cases this work is handicapped by inadequate infrastructure and utilities. This situation is exacerbated by a lack of forward planning and inadequate budgetary provisions by service providers. This often results in significant time delays to projects. Furthermore, in several towns the utilities are owned and operated by the resource companies. This, in turn, can add significant complexity to the task.

Improving the Architectural Standard and Amenity of FIFO Accommodation

Traditionally "dongas" have been the favoured form of FIFO accommodation constructed by resource companies. This can be attributed to its relatively speedy form of construction and economical cost.

The disadvantage of such a form of construction is its bland appearance, low level of amenity and the difficulty of treating such structures in a manner which is sympathetic to more traditional forms of accommodation.

It is for the latter reasons that Pilbara local governments have attempted to discourage this form of construction in urban areas by means of planning policies and negotiation. The objective has been to achieve a mixture of accommodation styles, which are compatible with existing residential development and which offer a higher level of amenity. Although more expensive than the traditional "dongas", the long term, positive outcomes of more sensitive accommodation styles do help to lessen some of the adverse impacts of FIFO workforces on towns.

Conclusions

The SOA and SOEP appreciate the opportunity offered by the House of Representative's Standing Committee on Regional Australia in relation to its inquiry into FIFO/DIDO workforces in Regional Australia.

The shires acknowledge that FIFO workforces are the only practical option in some circumstances. The shires have, however, deep concerns with regards to the adverse impact of FIFO workforces can have on existing communities within the region.

The three levels of government, those being the Commonwealth, State, and local government, as well as the resource industry, all have a role in ensuring that these detrimental impacts are minimised.

The SOA and SOEP, as well as other Pilbara local governments have attempted to address some of these adverse outcomes, however, the ability of the third level of government to generate outcomes is limited, due to its diminished role in the planning process and the lack of financial resources.

Finally, SOA and SOEP believe that there is a role for the Commonwealth government to assist with addressing some of the outstanding issues, associated with FIFO workforces. These actions include;

- The Commonwealth government requiring the Australian Bureau of Statistics to address those systemic issues within the organisation which result in it continually under enumerating permanent populations in remote regions of the country.
- The Commonwealth government amending the criteria applying to the Australian Taxation Zone Rebate, in order to direct increased benefits to those living permanently in remote areas and that it not be a benefit for more urban-based FIFO workers.