

Senate Estimates Opening Statement: The new Department

Talking points:

- Thank you for the opportunity to make an opening statement.
- The Department of Regional Australia, Regional Development and Local Government (the Department) was formally created as a result of Administrative Arrangement Orders which were signed by the Governor-General on 14 September 2010 following the finalisation of the 2010 election. My acting appointment took place effective from 20 September 2010.
- The government has a renewed focus on regional Australia with a dedicated department within the Prime Minister's portfolio and a dedicated Cabinet Minister, who is supported by Ministers and Parliamentary Secretaries with responsibilities covering the States and Territories
- Broadly speaking, the Department's role is to engage with and empower local communities, develop informed regional policies, oversee the rollout of regional initiatives, and provide a dedicated source of advice on regional development. The department also has a number of regional development and local government programs to administer plus administration of territory matters.
- The programs and functions that have transferred into the Department from the Department of Infrastructure and Transport include the following administered programs:
 - Regional and Local Community Infrastructure Programs;
 - Better Regions;
 - East Kimberley Development Package
 - Regional Development Australia Committees
 - Jobs Funds – National Bike Path Project
 - Jobs Funds – Infrastructure Employment Project
 - Local Government Reform Fund
- Other functions include the Office of Northern Australia.
- The programs and functions that have transferred into the Department from the Attorney-General's Department include the Services to Territories administered program.
- For 2010-2011, this means that the Department has responsibility for administered funds transferred amounted to \$2.3 billion and so far departmental resources of about \$25 million were transferred.
- In addition to supporting the existing programs we are developing our capacity to deliver against the Government's new commitments to Regional Australia.
- In addition to establishing the Department early priorities to support the Minister's commitment to Regional Australia include:
 1. Ensuring we have a well coordinated approach across government in supporting and empowering local communities;

-2-

2. Ensuring programs in the Department and across Government take into account the needs and priorities of Regional Australia;
 3. Contributing to the Government's "Commitment to Regional Australia"; agreement with the independent members of Parliament, including managing key elements of the agreement;
 4. Identifying opportunities for regions to improve productivity and growth for example, by accessing key programs across Government
 5. Facilitating effective engagement with local communities, in partnership with states and territories and local government;
 6. Developing robust regional information and evidence for Government to make informed decisions based on needs and priorities and to be able to report on the pattern of Commonwealth investment and effort in Regions.
 7. Improving the governance and implementation of existing programs and services to the territories.
- The Department currently has approximately 250 departmental officers. There are also about 120 non-APS employees delivering services in the Indian Ocean Territories. The department maintains 12 office locations throughout Australia's regions and territories.
 - APS staff from the Department of Infrastructure and Transport and the Attorney-General's department transferred to the Department under section 72(1)(a) of the *Public Service Act 1999* with effect from 1 October 2010.
 - We are in the process of developing our work plan to support the minister and the sub-committee of Cabinet. Some of the programs we will be responsible for either delivering or starting to deliver this financial year include:
 - Election commitments, for example delivering a wide range of community infrastructure projects announced by the government in the 2010 election
 - Key components of the "Commitment to Regional Australia" package, including:
 - The establishment of a Regional Development Policy Centre, using an initial \$8 million grant;
 - Strengthening the Regional Development Australia (RDA) network to give a stronger voice to the regions and work across all levels of government to re-energise regional economies; and
 - A strengthened Office of Northern Australia
 - The \$800 million Priority Regional Infrastructure Program and the \$573 million of the Regional Infrastructure Fund earmarked for Regional Development Australia. These funds will support the infrastructure needs and economic growth of Regional Australia. Guidelines for these programs are currently being developed for consideration by Government; and
 - Continuing to administer the Financial Assistance Grants which have provided significant support to local government over many years.
 - Thank you.