

Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Legislation Committee
ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE
Budget Estimates May 2010
Regional Australia, Regional Development and Local Government

Question No.: ONA 01

Division/Agency: Office of Northern Australia

Topic: Staffing at the Office of Northern Australia

Hansard Page/s: 24-25 (27/05/10)

Senator Macdonald asked:

Senator IAN MACDONALD—How many is that in Canberra?

Ms Fleming—I think it is about 14.

Senator IAN MACDONALD—Fourteen in Canberra?

Ms Fleming—Fourteen to 13 staff, approximately. I can give you an actual breakdown on notice.

Answer:

There are fourteen staff in ONA in Canberra

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Question No.: ONA 02

Division/Agency: Office of Northern Australia
Topic: Staffing in the Office of Northern Australia
Hansard Page/s: 28 (27/05/10)

Senator Macdonald asked:

Senator IAN MACDONALD—I will pass over the call shortly. As I recall, in the first year of the current government, there were eight or nine people in that office. Is that correct?

Ms Foster—I do not have that figure with me, sorry, and I was not in the department then.

Senator IAN MACDONALD—Okay. Perhaps you could give me the details of the numbers in that office in 2006-07 and every year since up to the present. But you are not conscious, either you or Mr Mrdak, of the fact that the staff in that Townsville office has been reduced over the last couple of years?

Ms Foster—Not in any significant way.

Answer:

The staffing of the Townsville Office from 2006-07 to 2009-10 is set out below:

2006-07 – 7
2007-08 – 7
2008-09 – 5
2009-10 – 5

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Question No.: ONA 03

Division/Agency: Office of Northern Australia
Topic: Staffing the Office of Northern Australia
Hansard Page/s: 29 (27/05/10)

Senator Macdonald asked:

Senator IAN MACDONALD—I am not saying you have reduced them to pay for anything; I am just saying the actual numbers have reduced. I can go back through old estimates, but I think in the first year of the current government there were about eight, or it might have even been 12, in Townsville and there are now five.

Ms Foster—We will get those for you.

Answer:

See answer to ONA 02.

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Question No.: ONA 04

Division/Agency: Office of Northern Australia

Topic: Wyndham Picture Gardens

Hansard Page/s: 31 (27/05/10)

Senator Sterle asked:

CHAIR—The swimming pool, the picture gardens. How many will that seat at the picture gardens?

Ms Fleming—I cannot tell you exactly how many it will seat. I would have to take that on notice.

Answer:

The Wyndham Picture Gardens will seat up to 250 people.

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Question No.: ONA 05

Division/Agency: Office of Northern Australia

Topic: Warmun Early Learning Centre

Hansard Page/s: 31 (27/05/10)

Senator Sterle asked:

CHAIR—They were very proud of that.

Ms Fleming—The next project I have is the Warmun Early Learning Centre.

CHAIR—How far are into that are we?

Ms Fleming—The contract is awarded and preliminary site works have commenced.

CHAIR—Great. Can you tell us how many children that will advantage? If you cannot, take it on notice.

Ms Fleming—No, I will have to take that on notice, I am sorry.

Answer:

The maximum capacity of the new Warmun Early Learning Centre, when completed, will be 20 children.

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Question No.: ONA 06

Division/Agency: Office of Northern Australia

Topic: Kununurra Education Precinct – School Community Library Project

Hansard Page/s: 34-35 (27/05/10)

Senator Sterle asked:

CHAIR—It is going to be busy in Wyndham in the next few months, isn't it?

Ms Fleming—I think so. The Kununurra Education Precinct consists of four projects. We will construct, upgrade and refurbish the secondary school facilities; construct, upgrade and refurbish the primary school facilities; construct and fit out the Kununurra school community library of approximately 400 square metres; and construct and fit out state of the art technologies to be attached to the school community library for upgrading the educational precinct.

Senator HEFFERNAN—Have you got a price for that?

Ms Fleming—That is \$48.5 million.

Senator HEFFERNAN—But per square metre?

Ms Foster—No, we do not have that with us.

Senator HEFFERNAN—Can you provide that?

Ms Fleming—The tender has been advertised.

Senator HEFFERNAN—When it comes in, can you provide it?

CHAIR—You can take it on notice.

Ms Fleming—We will take it on notice.

Answer:

The Western Australian Government is finalising the tender process for this project. Once a contract and price have been agreed, the cost per square metre can be provided.

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Question No.: ONA 07

Division/Agency: Office of Northern Australia

Topic: Indigenous corporations vs Commonwealth and State Government funding

Hansard Page/s: 36-37 (27/05/10)

Senator Back asked:

Senator BACK—Sure. If I can just continue on and perhaps pick up a point that the chairman and Senator Heffernan have made, we have all spent a lot of time in these communities and looked at the regrettable deterioration of housing, and obviously everyone is very concerned because housing is one of the key pillars in trying to alter behaviours and the wellbeing of the Aboriginal communities. In the tenders that are going out, are there requirements for builders to actually employ local people, particularly young people in the communities, to be part of the construction process, so that they do in fact have some pride in the construction and possibly a role in future maintenance?

Ms Foster—Absolutely.

Senator BACK—Can you just give us an idea how those requirements might play out?

Ms Foster—Sure.

Ms Fleming—It is my understanding that encouraging Indigenous employment as part of the construction is a core element of the tender, and I know that on the Wyndham swimming pool there were 12 Indigenous employees engaged in that particular tender. The tenders have not been set yet, so I cannot advise you how many Indigenous people will be employed on contracts not yet set, but we can report back to you as those contracts develop.

CHAIR—Could you take on notice, with the collaboration of our state colleagues and counterparts, not only the number of Indigenous employees but the number of Indigenous corporations that are utilised or successful over both streams of funding, Commonwealth and state?

Answer:

As of 1 July 2010 the majority of WA tenders are yet to be awarded.

The Australian Government is directly funding the following Indigenous organisations, Warmun Aboriginal community and Waringarri Aboriginal Arts.

As of 1 June 2010, 12 Indigenous people have been employed.

As of 1 June 2010, no Indigenous companies have been contracted directly or yet reported as having been subcontracted.

The Department is working with the Western Australian Government to develop processes to maximise jobs and training for Indigenous people and opportunities for Indigenous businesses and corporations in the region.

This involves coordinating Indigenous employment strategies across the EKDP and the Ord Stage II irrigation areas development so these projects are not competing for the same workforce.

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A further update on the number of projects completed and tenders let or close to finalisation was provided during the Supplementary Estimates Hearings on 19 October 2010.

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Question No.: ONA 08

Division/Agency: Office of Northern Australia
Topic: Development of Northern Australia
Hansard Page/s: 40-41 (27/05/10)

Senator Heffernan asked:

Senator HEFFERNAN—Thanks very much for that. Ord stage 3: there is about 80,000 hectares if you fixed up that lead mine problem. A third of that is in the Northern Territory. Have the Northern Territory government changed their mind from when Clare Martin was there, that they were not interested in the development of Ord stage 3, which included the Northern Territory?

Senator Conroy—Why don't you ask the Northern Territory government?

Senator HEFFERNAN—No. If a job—

Senator Conroy—That was the appropriate way.

Senator HEFFERNAN—Certainly it was the job of the taskforce in my time.

Mr Mrdak—Certainly Parliamentary Secretary Gray has initiated discussions with the Northern Territory government and coordinated with WA about looking at those issues about how the Northern Territory fits into the work we are doing at East Kimberley and are starting to take a broader—saying, 'Let's not just look at what falls within the boundary of Western Australia, and went to the Northern Territory.' Particularly around those land and water issues, Parliamentary Secretary Gray is doing a lot of work on that.

Senator HEFFERNAN—Can you report to this committee on where that is up to?

Mr Mrdak—Certainly. I will take that on notice.

Answer:

The Northern Territory Government has established an Ord River Inter Departmental Committee to work with Western Australian government officials on the expansion of the Ord River.

The Departments of Agriculture from Queensland, Northern Territory and Western Australia recently signed a Memorandum of Understanding to facilitate collaboration across northern Australia on primary industry matters relating to northern development, and the Ord will be part of that process.

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Question No.: ONA 09

Division/Agency: Office of Northern Australia

Topic: Cape York Peninsula

Hansard Page/s: 42-43 (27/05/10)

Senator Heffernan asked:

Senator HEFFERNAN—Yes, but can I say, Minister, with a view to the national interest and to sovereign issues, it is difficult for us as a committee and for you as a task force or the office of whatever, to have to sit blindly by and watch half the Indigenous people up there wanting or having the aspiration of owning their own home to leave to their kids, to have some sort of commercial or agricultural development from which they are excluded. Some of them, of course, are happy to live the alternative lifestyle and just do the tourism thing, or knock around with boomerangs or something, but there are many people who want to be educated and get a quid and leave something to their kids and improve their lot in life, and it seems to me that it is siloed, and we need for you and the wisdom of the Commonwealth to be brought to bear on the wisdom of the state, with a view to further development. And to that end, what would be the position regarding sovereign funds—as they have done in New Zealand, where they are trying to buy 17,000 cows in one hit from the dairy farmers there—if they had said, ‘If you don’t want to develop Fitzroy and Margaret Rivers, we want to come in and do it with China’s sovereign funds, but we want to actually export the potential of that back to China. We will provide all the infrastructure et cetera’? Do we just let that happen?

Senator Conroy—I think that is a rhetorical question rather than a substantive—

Senator HEFFERNAN—No it is not. It is a serious question about where agriculture is going.

Senator Conroy—We will take it on notice. If there is anything we can add—

Senator HEFFERNAN—The northern development office is a serious player in the future of Australia.

CHAIR—Senator Macdonald.

Senator Conroy—We will take on notice your question and if there is anything we can add, we will.

Answer:

The Office of Northern Australia provides policy advice to the Australian Government on matters of sustainable development in northern Australia. Investment of foreign capital in projects in Australia is a matter for the Foreign Investment Review Board.

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Question No.: ONA 10

Division/Agency: Office of Northern Australia

Topic: Northern Taskforce Chair

Hansard Page/s: 43 (27/05/10)

Senator Macdonald asked:

Senator IAN MACDONALD—Okay. But is he getting assistance from the department in things like writing letters to the editor in various newspapers, as recently—I think I saw one last week somewhere.

Ms Foster—Senator, my office has worked quite closely with Mr Ross over the past several years of the task force, and I think there is ongoing discussion between them, but I do not have any detail of what the nature of that is.

Senator HEFFERNAN—Does Mr Dickson write the letters for him?

Ms Foster—Mr Dickson certainly has worked very closely with Mr Ross over many years, but I would need to take on notice what work is actually happening, if any.

Senator IAN MACDONALD—Take that on notice, by all means, although I suspect the answer is sitting right behind you, but I think I saw a letter, as I say, sometime in the last week from Mr Ross, and I just wonder if the department had any role in drafting or distributing that letter.

Ms Foster—Sorry, I am at a loss, because I do not have the letter and I do not know it, so I will take it on notice and get back to you.

Answer:

Yes the Department assisted the Chair of the Taskforce with drafting of letters.

This was in the context of the Chair of the Taskforce agreeing to assist the Office of Northern Australia with the dissemination of factual information about the report after its public release on 8 February 2010.

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Question No.: ONA 11

Division/Agency: Office of Northern Australia

Topic: Northern Taskforce payments

Hansard Page/s: 43 (27/05/10)

Senator Macdonald asked:

Senator IAN MACDONALD—Yes, and I am aware that some of the task force members refused to accept that. Is it possible to give the committee—no names—on notice, some details of the payments that have been made in the way of sitting fees, accommodation, travel, over the last financial year? Would that be—

Ms Foster—We can certainly take that on notice.

Senator HEFFERNAN—How much a day do they pay?

Ms Foster—I do not know, sorry.

Mr Mrdak—We will find out what the daily rate was for those who accepted the per diem.

Answer:

From 01 July 2009 to current (07/06/10)

Sitting Fees	\$34,055.50
Domestic Travel (Airfares)	\$118,301.35
Domestic Travel (Accommodation)	\$ 30,850.90
Members Travel Allowance	\$ 8833.67
Meeting Expenses	\$ 25,824.50
Official Hospitality	\$ 4579.06
Total	\$222,444.98

As per the Remuneration Tribunal's Payment of Sitting Fees:

Chair: \$495.00 per day

Committee members: \$366.00 per day

Of the 13 Taskforce members, 9 accepted remuneration.

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Question No.: ONA 12

Division/Agency: Office of Northern Australia

Topic: Mount Isa Railway extension

Hansard Page/s: 47 (27/05/10)

Senator Heffernan asked:

Senator HEFFERNAN—Could I just ask a question. Has the Office of Northern Australia given consideration to doing a feasibility study on joining up the Mount Isa railway line to the north-south line?

Mr Mrdak—No.

Senator HEFFERNAN—Would it be possible to request a feasibility on that?

Mr Mrdak—We can take that on notice.

Senator HEFFERNAN—You are aware of the mining it would open up?

Mr Mrdak—Yes.

Senator HEFFERNAN—Could you take that on notice?

Mr Mrdak—I am happy to take it on notice.

Answer:

The Office of Northern Australia has not considered conducting a feasibility study of joining the Mount Isa railway line to the north-south line.

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Question No.: ONA 13

Division/Agency: Office of Northern Australia

Topic: Role of Parliamentary Secretary for Northern and Western Australia

Hansard Page/s: 48 (27/05/10)

Senator Macdonald asked:

Senator IAN MACDONALD—Okay. Perhaps you could take on notice—or the minister might take on notice for reference to Mr Gray’s office—on just what part Mr Gray is playing in his role as parliamentary secretary for Northern and Western Australia.

Senator Conroy—Happy to take that on notice.

Answer:

Parliamentary Secretary Gray was responsibility for the Office of Northern Australia.

The Office of Northern Australia (ONA) was established in 2008 reflecting an election commitment of the Australian Government.

The ONA's key role is to provide policy advice to the Australian Government on sustainable development issues in, or affecting, northern Australia.

These include:

- Development priorities;
- Strategies to promote sustainable development; and
- Barriers impeding the development of significant initiatives.

In addition to this broader role, Parliamentary Secretary Gray had three specific policy initiatives he is taking forward. They are the:

- development of a whole-of-government response to the findings and recommendations of the Northern Australian Land and Water Taskforce;
- roll out the East Kimberley Development Package; and
- National Resources Sector Employment Taskforce, which is developing a comprehensive workforce plan to assess skill needs and deliver the large number of skilled workers required in the resources sector over the next five years.

These are currently being managed within the new Department of Regional Australia, Regional Development and Local Government, through the Office of Northern Australia.

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Question No.: ONA 14

Division/Agency: Office of Northern Australia

Topic: Kununurra Lead Mines

Hansard Page/s: 49-50 (27/05/10)

Senator Heffernan asked:

Senator HEFFERNAN—Can I ask where we are up to with the lead mine at Kununurra?

Mr Mrdak—I would have to take that on notice. I am not aware of where that one is up to.

Senator HEFFERNAN—You are aware of the lead mine, though?

Senator Conroy—I actually mentioned it just before.

Mr Mrdak—I will find some details for you, Senator.

Ms Foster—What is your specific interest?

Senator HEFFERNAN—If we are going to do the full development of Ord 2 and 3, including Carlton Hills, and sort out the sovereign issue with the drainage down the Keep River et cetera, you are going to have to do something about the lead mine. I just wondered whether the global food might be more important than the lead mine.

Ms Foster—We will take that on notice and come back to you.

Senator HEFFERNAN—In the considerations with Mr Dickson and others—this was raised three years ago—has there been any further talks about the lead mine within what was the task force and is now the Office of Northern Australia?

Ms Fleming—We are aware of the lead mine issue, but we would have to take the details on notice.

Senator HEFFERNAN—Have there been any discussions? Surely you would know if there have been discussions with the Western Australian government or the owners of the lead mine or—

Ms Foster—Sorry, I do not have any information. We will have to come back to you on that.

Senator HEFFERNAN—So there have not been, by the sound of it, because Mr Dickson would know.

Ms Foster—Not to my knowledge, but I just do not want to—

Senator HEFFERNAN—Could you update us as to the various options being considered, and if there are not being any options considered, could we put on notice that we would like some options considered for the complete development of that.

Ms Foster—Yes.

Answer:

In March 2010 Kimberley Metals reported that previous uncertainty over the future development of this project in relation to the expansion of the Ord River irrigation scheme has recently been resolved with the granting of a 21 year renewal for the five Mining Leases covering the mineral deposits. The boundary of the Ord irrigation expansion project is to the west of the Mining Leases.