

# Regional infrastructure plans needed

## Battle for balance in communities with fly-in workers.



**JET LAG:** Concern for wellbeing of fly-in workers and their families

**G**overnments of all levels have been urged to provide strong policy responses to the myriad issues raised by a parliamentary inquiry into fly-in, fly-out (FIFO) workers.

The House of Representatives Regional Australia Committee released its report *Cancer of the bush or salvation of our cities?* after a year-long investigation into the impacts of FIFO operations in remote and regional communities across Australia.

The committee has recommended the Commonwealth undertake research in several areas, including the impact of a transient workforce on local services, infrastructure and medical services.

Its report has called for a more thorough examination of the health effects of FIFO and drive-in drive-out (DIDO) practices on workers and the wellbeing of their families, as well as the economic and social impacts on local communities.

It has also recommended a dedicated secretariat be established which would consult with states and industry to develop regional infrastructure plans.

And it wants the National Housing Supply Council to urgently develop a strategy to address the supply of

affordable housing in regional communities.

Queensland's Isaac Regional Council in the Bowen Basin is at the epicentre of the state's coal boom with almost 30 active mines operating in the region. Within this basin the town of Moranbah has been grappling with housing shortages and an increased burden on local infrastructure and services due to the high level of transient workers.

Mayor Anne Baker said her council is dealing with a population increase 30 years ahead of its time.

"One thing is clear to every sensible Australian who supports the expansion of the mining industry and the spreading of prosperity; the time for strong policy action through federal, state and local governments is now," she said.

"This report is just the start of a process to address the population imbalances and policy-funding challenges required, to ensure individuals, families, communities and the nation get the best outcomes from our mining resources."

Ms Baker said she looked forward to detailed discussions with ministers and industry players about future action.

The Australian Medical Association of Western Australia also welcomed the report but said governments were too slow to act.

"Since we first proposed many of these recommendations in mid-2011, the impact of FIFO on health issues has become even more serious," AMA WA president Dr Richard Choong said.

"Cost cutting steps taken recently by some mining companies are also having an impact on the provision of health services.

"The federal government has to act immediately on the recommendations and not allow them to be lost in the smoke of the federal election campaign."

Mining Family Matters is a support website for FIFO workers and their families. It has welcomed the report but said it is keen to ensure workers are not vilified in the ongoing debate.

"The report does talk about the need for companies to work with regional communities to break down the divide between locals and FIFO workers and we think that's a great idea," the website said in a statement.

Committee chair Tony Windsor (New England, NSW) said while there were many benefits to FIFO work practices, it is also clear they are eroding the liveability of some regional communities.

"There are great concerns to what the practice means long-term and, if it's transported into areas where there are existing communities based on existing economies, what that does to the price of housing for instance," Mr Windsor said.

"There are circumstances where people feel as though they're the site of the activity but not a major beneficiary."

The committee also recommended various fringe benefits tax breaks should be scrapped but the Minerals Council of Australia said it was opposed to any changes.

"FIFO is a key mechanism for spreading the benefits of the mining boom across Australia," chief executive Mitch Hooke said.

"That is why the federal government is currently funding FIFO coordinators in non-mining regional Australia to facilitate the practice." •

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