The biggest hurdle in the path of NT tourism reform has been cleared, and the "way ahead" now points to lasting benefits, the NT Tourism Commission (NTTC) interim chairman, Mr Jeff Weigh, said.

That hurdle, confronted by Mr Weigh from the first day of his appointment in early July, was to put in place an information and marketing system to replace the NTTC's closed outlets.

In just six weeks the mammoth task had been largely carried out, he said this week.

The computerised information and reservations centre at Alice Springs, now known as the NT Holiday Centre, was functioning ahead of expectations.

The centre's 24-hour 008 number system, set up to answer inquiries from all over the world, had gone from being an early problem-child to the NTTC's pride and joy.

"This is the heart of the business, and that heart is beating strongly," Mr Weigh said.

The NT Holiday Centre was manned by staff recruited from within the NTTC, including some from the former interstate bureaus, he said.

In the first week, the centre's 008 number served 100 calls.

By the end of August this number had increased to 400 a day and was still rising, Mr Weigh said.

Back at the coal-face, Mr Weigh and his implementation team had gained outstanding support from the majority of travel agents throughout Australia.

This was the breakthrough, he believed, which could calm the fears of Territory tour operators still in shock after the rapid demise of the NTTC's bureaus and offices.

The implementation team believed the travel agents can do a better job than the bureaus, and it has the NT Government's support.

Mr Weigh said discussions with travel agents had made it clear they would not only go along with new marketing strategies, but would vigorously support them.

Ironically, this attitude had largely come about through the closure of the NTTC's interstate bureaus.

"Previously agents were less enthusiastic about selling the Territory, because they were up against subsidised competition," Mr Weigh said.

The Australian Federation of Travel Agents (AFTA) executive director, Mr John Dart, confirmed his 2100 members welcomed the chance to sell the Territory.

AFTA also strongly promised support for Territory marketing through trade seminars, promotions and product familiarisations.

Mr Dart said AFTA members accounted for about 85 per cent of travel business written in Australia.

The travel agents would be serviced - through constant provision of updated information and frequent personal contact - by representatives of the NTTC's trade service centres in Sydney, Melbourne and Cairns.

The NTTC has emphasised the importance of this strategy by appointing the Darwin tourist bureau manager for the past five years, Mr Richard Jones, to establish the Cairns centre.

Cairns, the gateway to northern Australia, is strategically placed to provide a fresh flow of international tourists into the Territory, if marketing efforts meet with success.

The Sydney centre would be controlled by the former manager of the NTTC's now-closed tourist bureau.

Mr Weigh said Melbourne arrangements had not yet been finalised but should be in place by the end of the month.

He said now the first two steps in the marketing plan had been achieved, it was time to go to consumers.

Success in this area could see benefits in the form of improved off-season tourism start to appear within months.

The NTTC is expected to appoint its new advertising agency within two weeks, on a two-year tenure, which Mr Weigh said was the "sensible industry minimum".

Within weeks a Spring campaign will be launched in southern and eastern States, aimed at luring tourists to the Territory during the traditionally quiet December-March quarter.

Improved wet season tourism was one of the chief aims of the Kennedy recommendations.

The way ahead has been laid out and cleared by the implementation team.

But the journey along it should, as recommended by Mr Kennedy, be undertaken by the permanent workforce of a restructured Tourist Commission.

Management restructuring, starting right from the top, was well under way, Mr Weigh said.

The key appointment will be the NTTC's new chief executive officer.

Jeff Weigh

THE WAY AHEAD TIMETABLE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SEPTEMBER</th>
<th>OCTOBER</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Complete closure procedure for 5 NTTC overseas offices.</td>
<td>Spring advertising campaign.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Appoint NTTC advertising agency.</td>
<td>Appoint NTTC marketing, finance, planning directors.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Further talks with Australian Tourist Commission about overseas marketing.</td>
<td>Appoint chairman of NTTC board.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Establish trade service centre Interstate.</td>
<td>Complete formation of 11-member NTTC board.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Appoint NTTC chief executive officer.</td>
<td>Wind-down implementation team.</td>
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The timetable for proposed changes to the NTTC, as recommended in the Kennedy Report.
In the meantime the NTTC was advertising for senior executives, including finance director, planning director and marketing director.

Appointment of a board chairman was a matter for the Chief Minister, Mr Weigh said.

But he expected once the chief executive (also a board member) had been appointed, the full board, with its substantial industry representation, could be formed.

There were many more considerations, including the fine-tuning of overseas marketing, technology systems for the NT Holiday Centre and assistance to the industry for marketing within the Territory.

But the way ahead was now clearer to those involved, and to a supportive Government.

The rate of progress should impress the most determined doubters, Mr Weigh said.