Chief Minister Clare Martin joined State and Federal leaders in visiting Katherine today for the official start of tracklaying on the $1.3 billion Alice Springs to Darwin rail line.

"Today marks an historic and extremely significant stage in construction of this magnificent railway," she said.

"In what has been a project full of milestones, commencement of tracklaying stands alone - for many Territorians it will represent the true start of this long anticipated railway."

Ms Martin said the economic benefits of the project were being felt across the Territory with more than $334 million in contracts already awarded to local businesses, and that tracklaying provided firm visual evidence that construction is well underway.

"Land has been cleared, embankments built-up, thousand of metres of rail delivered and tens of thousands of concrete sleepers stockpiled in Katherine and Tennant Creek in preparation for tracklaying.

"Approximately 1.6 kilometres of rail will be laid daily from Katherine heading southwards, while tracklaying from Tennant Creek begins within weeks, north bound.

"The machines will meet halfway between the towns late this year, have a short break and start tracklaying towards Darwin and Alice Springs the following dry season.

"Hundreds of Territorians are already experiencing the benefits of this project and that will only increase as this next phase of the railway nears our two major centres."

Ms Martin said the 1420 kilometre railway will be completed in early 2004 with the first train expected to role into Darwin soon after.

"The railway has provided a huge shot in the arm for the NT and South Australian economies and, when combined with the East Arm Port development, is crucial in linking us to lucrative Asian markets.

"With tracklaying officially starting today the enormity of this project - and the massive economic potential that comes with it - is closer than ever to being realised."

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