Adelaide rail link signed and sealed

ALL ABOARD FOR DARWIN

By MILES KEMP
ANNABEL CRAGG
and HUNN MORGAN

CONSTRUCTION of the $1.2 billion Alice Springs to Darwin railway will begin next May.

A jubilant Premier John Olsen made the announcement last night after a further $162 million in taxpayer funding was pledged to the project yesterday.

Mr Olsen said 7100 direct and indirect jobs would be created during the three-year construction process.

"This is a great day for South Australia — after 90 years the rail line will go ahead," he said.

Mr Olsen travelled to Canberra yesterday to talk with Prime Minister John Howard and secure an additional $45 million in Federal funding.

A further $65 million will come from South Australian taxpayers and $60 million from the Northern Territory.

Overall, taxpayers will contribute $400 million, with the owners and operators of the Asia Pacific Transport Consortium contributing the remaining $590 million.

Mr Howard said the project would be "the jewel in the crown of the Northern Territory".

"I've got to say there were various stages where I wondered if it was going to happen or not, but I think this is fantastic," he said.

"It's a decades-old dream of linking the Southern Ocean to the Timor Sea — it's a great piece of nation-building infrastructure and it's a very important commitment by the Government to regional Australia and the most tangible way possible — and that is through jobs, investment and infrastructure."

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- The 1410km Alice Springs to Darwin line will create 7100 direct and indirect jobs.

- Work will start in May and is scheduled to be completed in 2003.

- The economic benefit to South Australia — based on current values — is estimated at about $500 million a year, mainly through exports.

- Construction will involve 120 bridges, 2.3 million sleepers and 149,000 tonnes of steel for the track.
All aboard as Darwin rail link gets go-ahead

Mr Howard said he became inspired to contribute more to the project by attending the 50th anniversary of the Snowy Mountains Hydro-electric Scheme two weeks ago.

The nation's defence requirements, highlighted by the East Timor conflict, had been "a factor", he said.

Under an agreement with the consortium, 70 per cent of all the materials used on the line must be manufactured in Australia.

The Asia Pacific Transport Consortium is headed by United States giant Brown and Root Engineering. It also includes Adelaide-based Kimball engineers, rail operators Genesis and Wyoming, Bankers Trust and Australian companies Barclay Mowlem, John Holland Group, MFG Logistics and Hong Kong-based Hutchison Port Holdings.

The consortium's chairman is Kimball chairman Malcolm Kinnaird. Consortium bid director Franco Moretti, of Brown and Root, said last night he was delighted with the result of the Canberra negotiations.

"This is a commercial project long overdue for industry, tourism and defence logistics in Australia," he said.

Mr Olsen said the preferred consortium to construct the project had agreed to the funding deal and an agreement would be finalised by March. "Construction will begin in May or June and it will be ready in 2003," he said.

Under an agreement with the consortium, 141km of railway line would be produced at Whyalla, providing 16 months' work for the BHP long products facility.

Mr Olsen praised the efforts of Mr Olsen, describing him as "incredibly enthusiastic".

The vice-president of BHP's Whyalla operations, Leo Sellick, welcomed the announcement as "a boost to our business".

"This is a positive project for Whyalla and the whole region and we will continue to actively pursue the rail business," he said.

SA Employers Chamber president Mike Terlet said: "It is fantastic for South Australia and the whole of Australia."

He said the level of use of the line would depend on the freight rates compared to shipping and road transport. "For the project to go ahead it must have been a viable proposition," he said.

Mr Olsen said he also expected the line to help open up enormous untapped mineral deposits in northern SA.

Opposition transport spokeswoman Carolyn Pickles said Labor had always supported the project.

"I am pleased the Federal Government has finally come to the rescue of the project, but I hope it is not too little too late," she said.

Railway spokesman Geoff Wetherley said the rail line gave the company another option for its exports.

Snapsport on a car that should have been on the road

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Vehicles valued $350,000 accounted cent of all stolen.