Darwin rail plan stirs hope in bush

By Rebecca Rose

NEWS that the long-awaited Alice Springs to Darwin railway will go ahead has been welcomed as a heart starter for regional Australia amid comparisons with the Snowy Mountains scheme.

Under the plan announced by Prime Minister John Howard on Thursday night, the Federal, South Australian and Northern Territory governments will kick in $480 million over four years in addition to $750 million from preferred tenderer, the Asia Pacific consortium. The rail link will create up to 7000 jobs in a massive construction scheme to connect Darwin and Alice Springs by 1410km of track.

Both Labor and the Democrats support the rail link, despite Labor's criticism of the Government's poor treatment of the rest of Australia's rail network.

That criticism was echoed by the Australian Railway Association, which claimed that successive governments had failed to fund rail properly, leaving it a poor second to roads.

ARA executive director John Kirk welcomed the plan to build the rail link, saying it would provide the missing link in Australia's interstate rail network and highlighted the importance of rail to the nation's economy.

"The Government now has three years during the construction phase of the new line to bring the existing rail network up to the standards agreed at the meeting of transport ministers in September 1997," Mr Kirk said. "Without these upgrades the efficiency of the line to Darwin will be severely restrained and opportunities for new freight and passenger business will be limited."

A recent parliamentary inquiry into the rail network, chaired by National Party MP Paul Neville, said nearly $3.8 billion was needed to save Australia's rail network from falling into irreparable ruin.

Democrats leader Meg Lees said the rail link was a win for jobs and the environment.

"Providing a rail link for regional Australia will reduce the number of trucks on the road, thereby reducing greenhouse gas emissions and diesel pollution," Senator Lee said. "This reliance on the rail system will be a step towards real progress for Australia to meet its Kyoto greenhouse gas reduction targets." Opposition Employment spokesman Martin Ferguson accused the Government of trying to buy its way out of the unemployment problem, saying each of the 7000 jobs created by the scheme would cost the Government $63,000.

He said that pouring money into the Alice Springs-Darwin rail link would not solve problems blighting Australia's rail infrastructure.

"While Labor welcomes the new Federal commitment ... we must seriously question the neglect of the rest of the nation's rail sector," Mr Ferguson said.

Mateship is ruining rural communities: Anderson

By Carina Tan-Van Baren

MATESHIP is crippling rural communities, says Deputy Prime Minister John Anderson.

To laughter and cries of "hear, hear", he told the Regional Australia Summit that one of the big problems facing rural communities was that they tended to replace good leaders with malcontents.

And it all boiled down to mateship.

"My father-in-law was a naval officer, and he said one of the things that was internationally felt about Australians, one of their very enduring qualities during World War I and II, was the sense of mateship," Mr Anderson said.

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