MEDIA RELEASE

MINISTER FOR THE AUSTRALASIA RAILWAY
HON BARRY COULTER MLA

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Railway: Aboriginal Land Rights

RAILWAY CORRIDOR AGREEMENT ON ABORIGINAL LAND

The Northern Territory Government and the Northern and Central land councils today signed historic agreements for the Adelaide to Darwin railway to be built over Aboriginal land in the Northern Territory.

Railway Minister Barry Coulter said the agreements followed more than two years of hard bargaining and represented one of the more difficult and frustrating tasks he had addressed in his 15 years as a Minister.

"It was enormously complex because of different land tenure situations along the 1410 km length of the railway corridor and because so many individual Aboriginal stakeholders and families were involved," he said.

"I fully appreciate the land councils themselves had similar complex issues to address through widely varying interests and aspirations among their constituents.

"It's been a long road but, in the end, we have arrived at a successful outcome."

Mr Coulter said most people involved had always supported the railway project. It was a matter of negotiating agreements which brought realistic benefits, both in the construction process and in the longer term.

The $8.4 million benefits package contains:

- compensation payment of $3 million for all Aboriginal interests in land, including land claims and native title.
- amelioration costs of $2.4 million for the impact of railway construction on Aboriginal landholders, to be identified by a Railway Impact Study costing $140,000 and conducted by the land councils.
- replacement of housing at a cost of $500,000.
- a communities development package of $2 million for capital works (eg. roads) on communities affected by the railway.
- contribution of $360,000 to the land councils to assist consultation with Aboriginal landholders.

"It is a just and equitable package compensating people for loss of land title and for the effects and impact of railway construction and operation," Mr Coulter said.

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The Minister said completion of the agreements sent a positive signal to the three consortia seeking to build, own and operate the railway.

He said the bidding process would close at the end of March. A successful consortium would then be chosen in concert with the Territory and South Australian governments, and this was expected to be announced around mid-year.

All going well, construction plans could be in place by the end of the year with a project completion date in late 2002 or 2003.

ENDS