NT rail deal finally signed

THE first contracts paving the way for the construction of the Alice Springs to Darwin Railway were signed on Wednesday.

Representatives of the Asia Pacific Transport Consortium, Prime Minister John Howard, Chief Minister Denis Burke and South Australian Premier John Olsen gathered at the Islington rail workshops in Adelaide to sign the documents confirming the project would go ahead.

The signing signalled the credit committees of the five financial institutions involved in the $1.23 billion project had authorised the release of money required for construction.

The Federal and Territory governments have each contributed $165 million to the project and the SA Government has contributed $150 million.

The six-member consortium will contribute the $750 million.

The 1410km track will link Alice Springs and Darwin and open the way for an alternative trade link from southern Australia into Asia.

Mr Howard looked relaxed and excited as he spoke about the reasons for his commitment to the project.

He said: "It's one of the biggest infrastructure projects in Australia's history, it's going to provide 7000 jobs during the construction phase."

Work on the project is expected to start in December, soon after the signing of financial contracts on November 30.

The project is expected to create up to 2000 construction jobs and a further 5000 jobs in areas relating to the supply of goods and services.

Miles of smiles ... SA Premier John Olsen, Prime Minister John Howard and NT Chief Minister Denis Burke in Adelaide on Wednesday.