



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

COMMITTEES

Public Works Committee

Report

SPEECH

Monday, 20 October 2014

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Andrews, Karen, MP

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Mrs ANDREWS (McPherson) (12:01): On behalf of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works, I present the committee's report No. 6 of 2014, addressing a referral made in July 2014.

Report made a parliamentary paper in accordance with standing order 39(e).

Mrs ANDREWS: by leave—Report No. 6 of 2014 considers a referral received by the committee from the Department of Defence in mid-July. At an estimated cost of \$1,477.4 million, excluding GST, in dollar terms this represents a very significant project.

Defence sought approval from the committee to provide new air combat capability facilities to support the acquisition of 72 F35A aircraft. The F35A aircraft are being purchased to replace the RAAF's current fleet of classic Hornets. When integrated fully into the Australian Defence Force, Australia's F35A fleet will deliver the air dominance and strike functions currently provided by the classic Hornet.

The New Air Combat Capability Facilities Project will provide the necessary facilities and infrastructure to support the introduction into service and operation of the F35A aircraft at RAAF bases around the nation. The majority of the works will be undertaken at RAAF Base Williamtown in New South Wales and at RAAF Base Tindal in the Northern Territory.

RAAF Base Williamtown will remain as the premier base for the train-and-sustain functions of Australia's air combat capability, as well as providing the staging point for deployment to forward operating bases.

RAAF Base Tindal will support the train-and-sustain functions as the home for the third operational squadron as well as being a forward operating base for visiting F35A squadrons.

The facilities works which are proposed at RAAF Bases Williamtown and Tindal include:

squadron facilities to support the operation and maintenance of the aircraft;

training facilities to develop and sustain pilots and maintenance staff;

airfield infrastructure;

and logistics facilities.

Minor facilities to accommodate squadron support functions are proposed at RAAF Bases in Townsville (QLD), Darwin (NT), Curtin (WA), Scherger (QLD), Learmonth (WA), Pearce (WA) and Edinburgh (SA).

Construction of additional explosive ordnance and countermeasure storage capacity is proposed at Defence Establishment Myambat (NSW) for the storage of F35A armaments.

In conducting this inquiry, the committee was mindful that it was assessing a project with a value of approximately \$1½ billion and a timeframe of up to eight years until completion. As always, the Public Works Committee is bound by its act to consider and report on public works 'as expeditiously as is practicable'. The committee did its best to balance the need for an expeditious outcome with a level of inquiry commensurate with the value of the project.

The committee allowed five weeks to receive submissions from interested parties and it made two site inspections—at RAAF Bases Williamtown and Amberley in Queensland.

RAAF Base Amberley is not part of the project being reported on today but the visit to the RAAF base allowed the committee to inspect the modern fighter facilities which are being used by the squadron which operates Super

Hornet aircraft. These high-security facilities were completed in 2010 and are indicative of the type of facilities which will be built at RAAF bases in Williamtown and Tindal for the F35A aircraft.

At RAAF Base Williamtown the committee inspected the existing facilities which are being used by the classic Hornet squadrons. These facilities were built in the 1960s and 1980s and contrast starkly with the modern Super Hornet facilities at Amberley. The facilities proposed to support the F35A aircraft when they arrive at RAAF bases Williamtown and Tindal will be similar to those the committee saw at RAAF Base Amberley.

The committee held public and private hearings for the inquiry in the town of Raymond Terrace near RAAF Base Williamtown and also in Parliament House in Canberra.

One of the issues of concern brought to the committee was whether the proposed extensions to either end of the runway in Williamtown could increase noise levels. The Hon. Bob Baldwin MP, federal member for Paterson, suggested in his submission to the inquiry that a less noisy option for some nearby residents would be to build a second runway instead of extending the existing runway.

However, Defence told the committee that there are a number of concerns with the option of a second runway, not least because it would need to go through the wetlands in the adjacent national park. The monetary and ecological costs would be significantly higher than extending the existing runway.

Defence acknowledged that issues relating to noise will remain a concern to some nearby residents but told the committee that the proposed extension of the runway at Williamtown will in fact reduce noise impacts. An extended runway means that afterburners will not be used during the majority of take-offs and this will actually minimise the noise impacts on the base and surrounds. The committee is satisfied that the runway extension as proposed is appropriate.

The committee questioned Defence about the level of consultation that had taken place with community and other stakeholders, particularly in Williamtown and Tindal. Defence assured the committee that it undertook extensive community consultation to ensure that the public was informed about the project and had every opportunity to raise issues of concern or seek further information. In Williamtown, Defence has introduced a 'fly neighbourly' policy which included, it said, 'a robust engagement process with the community.' One of the outcomes of the policy is that aircraft now turn and fly over Grahamstown Dam to avoid the townships of Raymond Terrace and Medowie. This reduces noise over residential areas substantially. Since this process began, Defence has seen a significant drop-off in complaints from the community. The committee has asked Defence to continue to consult with local communities and interested parties to implement measures to mitigate noise impacts where possible.

The committee did not identify any issues of concern with Defence's proposal and is satisfied, on the basis of information provided, that the project has merit in terms of need, scope and cost. However, given the scope, length and cost of the project, the committee has requested that Defence provide a project update at regular agreed upon intervals.

As I have already mentioned, this is a huge project in terms of both value and scope. The committee's inquiry was constrained by its obligation to report expeditiously. However, I believe that through the process of site inspections, taking submissions from a range of stakeholders and holding a number of public and private hearings that the committee has assessed the project to the best of its ability within the limited time available. Under these circumstances, the committee is satisfied that the project has merit in terms of need, scope and cost, and recommends that the project proceed.

I would like to thank members and senators for their work in relation to this important inquiry and my thanks, once again, goes to the secretariat. I commend the report to the House.