



Lee Katauskas
Committee Secretary
Senate Select Committee on the effectiveness
of the Australian Government's Northern Australia agenda
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Secretary

The Minerals Council of Australia was pleased to appear before the committee on 22 May and assist in its deliberations.

At the hearing, the chair, Senator Murray Watt, invited the MCA to add to any responses and answer questions on notice.

Issues raised included education, Indigenous engagement with Geoscience Australia, land use, and assessment and approval delays under the *Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act*. These are addressed below.

Education

Indigenous Australians, including Traditional Owners and other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from host communities, make a significant contribution to Australia's minerals workforce. Tailored training, education and employment programs provide pathways for Indigenous Australians to industry, particularly in regional and remote areas. As part of its policy advocacy, the MCA recommends governments support other industries, in partnership with host communities, to broaden Indigenous participation to other areas of Northern Australia's development. An overview of these pathways is provided below.

Work readiness programs

Well-established across the industry, work readiness programs provide tailored support for candidates that may benefit from additional assistance to transition to the minerals workforce.

Programs are usually fully or significantly funded by minerals companies and may extend for several weeks up to one year, depending on local needs and other factors. Workplace health, safety, wellbeing and life (including financial literacy) skills training, mentoring and support and transitional arrangements to adjust to mining shifts and rostering often form part of these programs.

Apprenticeship, traineeship and cadetship pathways

Apprenticeship, traineeship and cadetship opportunities for Indigenous Australians are another important pathway. Companies often prioritise or allocate opportunities specifically for candidates from host Traditional Owner groups (in accordance with local agreements or arrangements) and other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Providing cadetships to assist Indigenous Australians from mining regions to complete tertiary education are also well-established across the industry.

Targeted recruitment

Targeted recruitment to encourage and support local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation is also common. This often includes working with host Traditional Owners and local Indigenous Australians to identify potential candidates, which is especially important in areas where telecommunications access is limited or communities are geographically dispersed.

Career development programs

Tailored career development programs to support Indigenous Australians to transition into different or leadership roles are increasingly common.

Preparing for the workforce of the future

The nature of work is changing across all sectors of the economy. Programs that encourage and support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to pursue careers in science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) are becoming increasingly important. Various initiatives to increase the participation in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in STEM-related disciplines are supported by industry. This includes MCA's long-standing support of the Indigenous Engineering School.

In addition, the MCA is investing more than \$1 million in three tertiary education initiatives in 2020. Funding has been awarded to the University of Queensland and Curtin University to develop an industry-first micro-credential package that can be delivered remotely and to Central Queensland University and the University of Southern Queensland to refresh the Associate Degree of Engineering. Funding has also been provided to Curtin University to update its undergraduate mining curriculum

This is part of the \$65 million MCA members have invested in minerals-related programs at Australian universities since 2000.

Improving vocational education and training options, curriculum and delivery is also essential for the future minerals workforce. A flexible and responsive training regime is crucial to maximising skilled career pathways in regional and remote areas, especially for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Northern Australia.

Work is well underway on the Mining Skills Organisation Pilot, which the MCA was appointed to establish in November 2019 as part of the Australian Government's reform of the Vocational Education and Training system. The MCA is working with its partners to ensure that the needs and perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners, organisations and communities are considered during the pilot.

Indigenous engagement with Geoscience Australia

Supporting understanding of public geoscience data collected through its various programs is an important part of Geoscience Australia's role. The MCA understands the agency has focused on improving outreach and engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups and communities over the past two years.

The MCA has supported this work and encouraged Geoscience Australia present at the 2019 Aboriginal Enterprises in Mining, Energy and Exploration conference.

In addition, the MCA has recommended that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community outreach and education activities be incorporated into an extended *Exploring for the Future* program. This will enhance community confidence in geoscience data and assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups to identify economic opportunities on traditional lands.

At time of writing the Government has announced a four-year extension of the program, with increased spending. This will give ongoing opportunities for engagement.

Conservation

Biodiversity values should be appropriately protected. Different land uses, including conservation, mining and exploration can co-exist. The compatibility of conservation and other land use values should be determined through individual merits-based assessment informed by robust science. Minerals development can also facilitate broader environmental outcomes through offsets (e.g. establishing wildlife corridors) and voluntary initiatives to enhance regional environmental values.

The need to consider land use co-existence long been recognised by Australian governments. The Council of Australian Government's endorsed Multiple Land Use Framework should guide government decision making. Key principles include ensuring decision making does not exclude other potential uses without consideration of benefits and consequences to the wider community and risk-based approaches to determining land use compatibility.

Delays in assessment and approvals

The adoption of assessment bilateral agreements between the Commonwealth, states and territories can assist in improving the coordination between regulatory processes. However, results have been mixed and project proponents continue to experience significant delays. These delays are driven by unnecessary overlap and failure to coordinate despite the presence of these agreements. Furthermore, there is limited coordination of final and post-approval processes.

In a recent speech to the Committee for the Economic Development of Australia *State of the Nation* conference, the Prime Minister cited a Department of Agriculture, Water and Environment analysis which estimated that delays in environment approvals cost businesses \$300 million in 2019.¹ It is important to note the commitment to drive approval delays down towards 30 days (from 90 days in 2019 and 45 days currently) while welcome reflects only one part of approval process. Processes in the lead up to, and after the Ministerial decision significantly impact on project timeframes and the ability to commence work.

The MCA also supports the Prime Minister's commitment to reduce assessment and approval timeframes from 3.5 years to 21 months. While specific to 'major' projects, the commitment represents a positive step.

Yours sincerely

Sid Marris
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¹ Prime Minister, The Hon. Scott Morrison MP, [Address - CEDA's State of the Nation Conference](#), 15 June 2020