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Mr Tony Windsor MP
Chair
Standing Committee on Regional Australia
House of Representatives
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Mr Windsor

INQUIRY INTO THE USE OF FLY-IN, FLY-OUT WORKFORCE PRACTICES IN REGIONAL AUSTRALIA

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input into your inquiry on the use of FIFO/DIDO workforce practices in regional Australia.

Before speaking directly to the terms of reference, I would like to provide some background on Mining Family Matters and our website www.miningfm.com.au.

The site offers free professional support and practical advice to families in mining and resources. It features monthly columns and Q&A sessions with a professional psychologist and social worker, an online chat forum, a guide to mining towns and sections on careers, relocation advice and financial guidance.

Since our launch in February 2010, we've attracted more than 90,000 visitors. The site now features more than 400 pages of advice and information, and attracts more than 6500 people every month. The website's three principal sponsors are OZ Minerals, Primary Industries and Resources South Australia and Caltex.

Following the success of the site and the clear need for information and support among families in mining and resources, we have also begun producing two survival guides.

The first is called *The Survival Guide for Mining Families* and aims to help mining families survive and thrive despite the pressures of FIFO rosters and living in isolated communities away from family and support networks.

The guide includes advice from our MiningFM psychologist on topics including mining dads and parenting, sex and FIFO couples, the art of making new friends, house rules for happy homes, relocating with kids, and women

in mining. The 32-page, A5 guide was launched in March, with more than 25,000 copies sold to mining and resources companies Australia-wide in the past five months.

Working Away: A Survival Guide for Families was launched in early September, following increasing requests for survival guides from companies and individuals outside 'mining' (e.g. oil and gas, construction, transport). Its content is very similar to the initial guide, with two additional chapters on what to expect in the early months of FIFO living, and how to identify stress and depression.

We are already receiving enquiries about the guide from industries as varied as horse racing, long-haul trucking, the diplomatic corps, nursing and mine security.

Costs and benefits for companies, and individuals, choosing a FIFO/DIDO workforce as an alternative to a resident workforce.

With regard to this term of reference, I would like to comment on the costs and benefits for 'individuals' choosing FIFO/DIDO as an alternative to residential living.

My husband is a mining engineer – due to the transient nature of the industry, we moved six times in the space of a decade for his work. Our last residential posting was in the outback NSW town of Cobar. It's a fantastic town and we made many great friends there, however I went through two pregnancies without obstetrics care which wasn't ideal. The children and I also saw less and less of my husband because he was always at the mine site. Ultimately we decided to leave Cobar and set up our young family near relatives in Adelaide so that my husband could begin working FIFO. The major reason for this was to ensure Joe had good blocks of time away from work to spend with the family.

Joe initially flew from home to WA, and now flies up to Darwin. Because he's working FIFO, these career moves have not impacted on the stability of our family or affected our children's schooling. In the NT, the closest towns to his mine sites are Humpty Doo and Pine Creek. If we were to relocate, Joe would still need to work DIDO, but I would be removed from my support networks and our children would be taken out of a great little SA school where they are thriving.

Families chatting on the Mining Family Matters website generally acknowledge the benefits of FIFO/DIDO as improved household income, greater opportunities for the miner to participate in daily family activities during rostered time off, career stability for the partner at home and better health and education offerings and public infrastructure in cities and larger regional centres.

That's not to say FIFO/DIDO families don't accept that there are challenges. I actually decided to establish Mining Family Matters after struggling to find resources to help my children cope with regular separation from their dad when he started working FIFO.

Other pressures regularly raised by families on the website include consistency and unity with parenting, arguments over prioritising time together, loneliness and insecurity when separated (especially in the early days), mood swings, and the need for strong communication and family goal setting. But overwhelmingly, mining families are aware of the issues and keen to work out strategies to ensure their relationships remain healthy.

Another positive move is that mining companies are increasingly looking to support the families of their employees. As previously mentioned, in the past five months we've sold more than 25,000 copies of our *Survival Guide for Mining Families* to companies across Australia (equating for about one tenth of the mining workforce nationally). This shows that mining companies are keen to help employees/families with independent, proactive advice as part of their own Employee Assistance Programs.

Strategies to optimise FIFO/DIDO experience for employees and their families, communities and industry

Keen interest in www.miningfm.com.au and *The Survival Guide for Mining Families* shows there is demand out there for services and proactive strategies to help families cope with this new lifestyle phenomenon. And FIFO/DIDO mining families deserve support. Of course, families have a choice about accepting jobs that require one partner to work away, but they are nonetheless helping to underpin a thriving Australian industry.

It's our view that common relationship challenges surrounding FIFO/DIDO should be raised with employees as part of company inductions. If employees are armed with proactive, simple relationship strategies from the outset, it might help to prevent families from reaching crisis point down the track.

With national turnover in the FIFO workforce averaging about 20 per cent, we believe it is also in the country's interest to ensure miners and their families feel happy and supported. A contented miner is more likely to have his/her mind on the job, and less likely to be hunting for other employment opportunities.

Because FIFO/DIDO work practices have grown relatively quickly in Australia, it almost seems like there's a divisive 'FIFO families versus regional communities' mentality starting to appear in the national conversation. This is not helped by media reports headlined along the lines of "FIFO workers destroy regional communities: expert" (*WA News*, 21 June 2011).

It must be remembered (and preferably stressed by government regulators and industry) that the percentage of FIFO versus residential labour at any given mine site is a matter of company policy, not 'family' choice.

Depending on factors including mine location, partner dynamics, career demands and the age of children requiring schooling etc, residential living will sometimes be preferable for families, and sometimes it will be FIFO/DIDO. Both have their pros and cons and mining families should be supported whichever choice they make.

Another negative stereotype that has recently emerged in the media is that FIFO families are dysfunctional. ("Having dad up in the mines might deliver the household a plasma telly and the odd Bali holiday, but is there a greater social cost that we have yet to really understand?" – Demographer Bernard Salt writing in the *Adelaide's Sunday Mail*, 21 May 2011.)

Undoubtedly, FIFO/DIDO families sometimes find it tough – the number of people seeking information on our website shows that there is a demand for simple advice to ease the pressures. But all families have their ups and downs. And for many mining couples, being based in a home town or city with good support networks is a better (more functional) option than living near a remote mine site.

Mining Family Matters strongly believes FIFO/DIDO can be a positive experience for families who adapt to the lifestyle.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide input into your inquiry, Mr Windsor. I have posted you 10 copies of our two survival guides, as a reference for your committee members. Please don't hesitate to contact me on 0411 481 134 or alicia@miningfm.com.au if you require further information.

Kind regards,

Alicia Ranford
Director
MINING FAMILY MATTERS