

JOINT MEDIA STATEMENT

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and Local Government**

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TASKFORCE TO DRIVE THE NORTH'S ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The Rudd Labor Government will transfer the \$20 million Northern Land and Water Taskforce to the newly created Office of Northern Australia and broaden its terms of reference.

Parliamentary Secretary for Regional Development and Northern Australian, Gary Gray, made the announcement today during an address to the True North Conference in Darwin.

"I am delighted the Rudd Government has decided to place the Taskforce within the Office of Northern Australia and give it a broader sustainability focus," said Mr Gray.

"This move is an indication of just how serious the new Government is about attracting and encouraging development opportunities across the country's vast north that deliver social, environmental and economic benefits."

Under the previous government, the Taskforce included a large number of politicians and was primarily focused on developing the Kimberley region's irrigation potential.

"The future of the north is more than just irrigation. The Taskforce will now identify sustainable development opportunities across a broader range of sectors," said Mr Gray.

Minister for Climate Change and Water, Penny Wong announced in January that the Taskforce membership and terms of reference would be revised to increase independence and broaden scope.

"We've already removed party political members from the Taskforce and have been working towards appointing new members with local expertise," Senator Wong said.

“By moving the Taskforce to the Office of Northern Australia, we are able to look more comprehensively at development opportunities that could impact water supplies.”

In announcing the changes to the Taskforce, Mr Gray singled out efforts of former Chair Senator Bill Heffernan as a tireless champion of the Taskforce.

“I would like to compliment the work of the Taskforce to date, including Senator Bill Heffernan,

“I know the Taskforce spoke to many people across northern Australia and I can assure them that their work will inform the Taskforce’s future deliberations.”

Minister for Regional Development, Anthony Albanese, said the fresh approach is part of a stronger commitment to Northern Australia under the Rudd Labor Government.

“We want to encourage development in Northern Australia that values the same protecting the region’s unique natural environment and its many social and cultural assets,” said Mr Albanese.

“The continuing economic development of the north is essential, not only for those that live in the region, but also for the country’s future prosperity.”

The Taskforce was formerly located within the Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts.

The Northern Australia Water Futures Assessment will continue to be delivered by the Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts and the National Water Commission.

Over the coming weeks the Government will take advice from stakeholders and state and territory governments in order to finalise the Taskforce’s new terms of reference and membership.