

Council of Australian Governments Meeting

Canberra 13 February 2011

Communiqué

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) held its 30th meeting in Canberra today. The Prime Minister, Premiers, Chief Ministers and the President of the Australian Local Government Association attended the meeting.

Natural Disasters

Recent natural disasters have had a profound effect on the Australian community. All Australians have been affected by the tragic loss of life and widespread devastation experienced in many communities.

COAG acknowledged the tremendous efforts of volunteers, emergency services personnel and the Australian Defence Force in responding to the disasters, with many crossing borders to help out.

COAG recognised the challenges facing many communities in the rebuilding process that lies ahead and welcomed the generous package of assistance the Commonwealth and affected States and Territories have provided for individuals, businesses, local government and the restoration of infrastructure following recent natural disasters. COAG noted the establishment of the Australian Government Reconstruction Inspectorate, which, together with State arrangements, will strengthen accountability and rigour in the use of substantial public funding to be committed to the rebuilding.

To improve Australia's ability to withstand and recover from future disasters, COAG adopted the [National Strategy for Disaster Resilience](#) and agreed to take immediate steps to implement it.

The Strategy focuses on the shared responsibility of governments, business and communities in preparing for, and responding to, disasters. It sets out concrete steps governments at all levels can take to reduce risks posed by natural disasters and better support communities to recover from disasters. Other actions will include steps to support improved risk-based planning decisions, the take-up of insurance and the provision and construction of resilient infrastructure.

A New Strategic Direction for COAG and Increased Accountability

COAG has a proud history of leading major reforms that have contributed to economic prosperity and improved the lives of all Australians. COAG has made significant progress in responding to the key challenges facing Australia of raising productivity and

improving workforce participation to lift Australia's long-run economic potential. The skills, deregulation and health reforms currently underway are key to this agenda.

Building on this record, COAG today adopted a streamlined agenda built around five themes of strategic importance that lie at the intersection of jurisdictional responsibilities:

- a long-term strategy for economic and social participation;
- a national economy driven by our competitive advantages;
- a more sustainable and liveable Australia;
- better health services and a more sustainable health system for all Australians;
and
- Closing the Gap on Indigenous disadvantage.

COAG renewed its commitment to strong ongoing monitoring and reporting of important national initiatives to ensure that they meet their goals and are delivered in a timely way. As part of the emphasis placed on implementation, governments committed to prioritising the passage of legislation to give effect to agreements reached by COAG.

COAG has also set ambitious goals to improve outcomes with the reviews of the performance frameworks of National Agreements providing an opportunity to ensure that progress is measured and that all jurisdictions are clearly accountable to the public and COAG for their efforts.

Consistent with the priority themes, COAG agreed that mental health reform and the final report of the Productivity Commission inquiry into a long-term disability care and support scheme (if available) will be considered at the next meeting of COAG.

National Health Reform

COAG today agreed to work in partnership on National Health Reforms to deliver a better deal for patients and secure the long-term sustainability of Australia's health system. National Health Reform will deliver a health system that will ensure future generations of Australians enjoy world class, universally accessible health care.

To give effect to these commitments, every Australian government signed a Heads of Agreement on National Health Reform (at Attachment A) and a revised National Partnership Agreement on Improving Public Hospital Services and committed to signing a full National Health Reform Agreement by 1 July 2011.

Regulatory and Competition Reform

COAG welcomed the release of the independent report by the COAG Reform Council (CRC) on the progress of the [National Partnership Agreement to deliver a Seamless National Economy](#), and its finding that good progress has been made in 21 of 27 deregulation priorities and six of eight competition reforms, with seven regulatory reforms and one competition reform completed. Since the report was finalised, a further six regulatory reforms have been completed or reached the implementation stage. Around half of the regulatory reforms are now complete.

Recognising the good progress being made in implementing the *Seamless National Economy* reforms, COAG agreed to bring forward its final completion date from June 2013 to December 2012.

Given the high priority all governments attach to boosting productivity and the competitiveness of the economy, COAG asked relevant ministers and officials for options to be developed for a further wave of regulatory and competition reforms. COAG will consider the options later in 2011. COAG released a [brochure](#) and a [report card](#) to provide information on the most up-to-date progress of this national partnership and its benefits to business, consumers and the economy.

To progress the current regulatory reform agenda, COAG:

- signed an Intergovernmental Agreement to bolster the national approach to food regulation;
- agreed in principle to settle reforms to legal profession regulation by May 2011 (with the exception of Western Australia and South Australia);
- agreed that the Australian Transport Council will finalise arrangements for a national maritime safety regulator that will ensure that all owners, operators and builders of commercial vessels face the same regulatory arrangements; and
- determined that the national agreements on transport regulators be completed by July 2011.

Details of the regulatory and competition reforms are at Attachment B.

Infrastructure Planning - Ports

COAG endorsed the need for a national ports strategy. The strategy is to be an integral part of the national freight strategy that is under development. It will improve productivity, promote better long-term planning around ports and bring a greater focus on performance to Australia's waterfronts.

COAG asked the relevant Ministerial Council to complete an implementation plan for a final national ports strategy by August 2011 for out-of-session endorsement by COAG.

Vocational Education and Training

Skills and Workforce Development

In light of the changes in economic conditions since the National Agreement on Skills and Workforce Development was agreed in November 2008, COAG has requested that it be reviewed to ensure it supports a VET system that:

- is responsive to contemporary economic conditions; and
- meets the skills needs of the economy and industry and the preferences of students.

National Vocational Education and Training Regulator

COAG affirmed the importance of greater participation to ensure that more Australians contribute to, and benefit from, the prosperity of the nation.

In recognition of the importance of skills and workforce development, COAG (with the exception of Victoria and Western Australia) agreed in principle to the Intergovernmental Agreement (IGA) for Regulatory Reform of Vocational Education and Training (VET) with sign-off by the end of February 2011.

This agreement will establish a national VET regulator to drive better quality standards and regulation across the Australian VET sector. Ensuring rigorous quality assurance of education and training is critical to increasing the skills and qualifications of individual workers and the productivity of the economy. Victoria and Western Australia committed to a national approach to regulation of the sector but maintained they should have regulatory control over certain providers including TAFEs.

Unique Student Identifier for VET

COAG welcomed progress on the development of the Vocational Education and Training Unique Student Identifier (USI) and agreed to develop a formal business case by June 2011. A unique student identifier will simplify the process of enrolment and engagement with VET providers.

Ministerial Council Reform

Ministerial Councils play a key role in progressing important work across all levels of government. Drawing on the review of Ministerial Councils conducted by Dr. Allan Hawke AC, COAG has agreed to a comprehensive reform plan for a new system of Ministerial Councils. These changes will see a fundamental shift towards a council

system focussed on strategic national priorities and new ways for COAG and its councils to identify and address issues of national significance.

COAG has effectively halved the number of Ministerial councils from over 40 to 23. This will see COAG focus on reforms of critical national importance through:

- a more agile and responsive system based on policy development through Standing Councils and flexibility to respond to critical and complex issues through time-limited subject-matter specific Select Councils;
- policy oversight of National Agreements and National Partnership Agreements;
- a system more focussed on implementation; and
- a tighter relationship between COAG and its Councils.

Further information on the Ministerial Council reform is at Attachment C.