



MEDIA RELEASE

Sustaining Native Forest Operations, Grants Administration, Tackling Cancer with Radiotherapy and Helping Aboriginal Defendants through MERIT

The Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, Mr Paul Gibson MP, today tabled the Committee's report on responses to the Auditor-General's performance audits on four audits, namely:

- Sustaining Native Forests Operations;
- Grants Administration;
- Tackling Cancer with Radiotherapy; and
- Helping Aboriginal Defendants through MERIT

The first audit examines whether Forests NSW effectively and sustainably manages the supply of State forest hardwood to meet commitments as part of its management of 2.2 million hectares of native forest and 48,140 hectares of hardwood plantations.

Mr Gibson said, "Forests NSW will face increasing challenges to meet demand in the coming years, although there will be sufficient timber to meet wood supply commitments up to 2023."

Forests NSW accepted all nine recommendations made in the Auditor-General's report. The fifth recommendation suggested that Forests NSW compare harvest results against its yield estimates over five-year periods as a means of testing the accuracy of estimates. The agency's response only partly met the objectives and the Committee recommended that the agency provide a further update on progress as part of the Government's response to the Committee's Report.

The Grants Administration audit refers to the adequacy of Government mechanisms for providing services to its citizens through contractors, direct staff or external organisations. In 2007-08, the NSW Government provided in excess of 26,800 grants to councils, non-government organisations and individuals totalling \$5.5 billion.

Mr Gibson said, "The Public Accounts Committee was pleased to note that the Department of Premier and Cabinet had accepted all but one of the Auditor-General's recommendations and has taken steps to incorporate these into the Good Practice Guide to Grants Administration". "The Committee would like to stress, however, the need for agencies to tie payments to performance where outcomes are important and significant funds are expended. Therefore, the Committee has recommended improved transparency measures to ensure that the stated objectives of the program are achieved and public receives value for money ", Mr Gibson continued.

The third audit, Tackling Cancer with Radiotherapy, examines the extent to which radiotherapy services are managed and provided effectively and efficiently. The Cancer Institute NSW has estimated a 30% increase in cancer diagnoses over the next 10 years (equivalent to 412,000 people in NSW). Cancer will cost the NSW economy around \$106 billion and \$320 billion over next 10 and 30 years respectively.

Radiotherapy services are costly to establish, with linear accelerators that deliver radiation treatment costing between \$3.5 million and \$5 million each. "The cost of radiotherapy and its importance in providing prompt and effective treatment now and in the future prompts the Committee to make a series of recommendations to address current shortcomings", Mr Gibson said. "This includes the establishment of formal cancer networks, implementation of Standards, upgrading systems and extending access hours".

The last audit report, Helping Aboriginal Defendants through MERIT, seeks to determine the effectiveness of the Magistrates Early Referral Intervention Treatment (MERIT) program in improving outcomes for Aboriginal defendants. MERIT is a three-month long program to rehabilitate defendants with drug problems prior to sentencing.

The program aims to reduce the incidence of crime by breaking the cycle of drug abuse through a range of treatment services including: counselling; detoxification; residential rehabilitation; and group meetings. Despite the fact that Aboriginal defendants are overrepresented in the criminal justice system they are underrepresented in MERIT. Although the program is now available in 61 of the 144 local courts in the State, only one additional MERIT court has been created since 2006.

The submission from the Department of Health advised that the implementation of ten recommendations had been finalised or were on track for completion within the established timeframes. Mr Gibson stated, "The Committee commends the Department of Justice & Attorney General, NSW Health and the NSW Police Force for their collaborative effort in implementing the Auditor-General's recommendations and for their progress to date. The Committee has also identified a need to expand the number of courts, promote ongoing training and performance monitoring".

"The Committee encourages the agencies to continue their efforts in giving effect to the Auditor-General's recommendations. It is hoped that their implementation will result in improved service delivery for Aboriginal defendants and ultimately this will help break the cycle of drug abuse and ameliorate the overrepresentation of Aboriginal people in the criminal justice system", Mr Gibson concluded.

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