

Courtney Houssos

Minister for Finance
Minister for Natural Resources

**Media Release****Meetings with Lightning Ridge Miners' & Landholders Associations; Refund Scheme; Appointment of Local Envoy**

Tuesday, 6 June 2023

Minister for Natural Resources, Courtney Houssos, today announced initiatives to support Small-Scale Title opal mine operators, including a refund scheme covering administrative fees and levies.

The initiatives were announced in Lightning Ridge by Ms Houssos ahead of a series of meetings with miners' associations, landholders' groups, and community stakeholders.

Ms Houssos will be accompanied on her visit to Lightning Ridge by the Member for Barwon Roy Butler MP and Stephen Lawrence MLC, who has been appointed as a Government envoy to liaise with stakeholders on this important issue.

"Our priority is to minimise the disruption to those affected by this legacy issue and to provide certainty to those holding mineral claims. I understand how important opal mining is to the communities of Lightning Ridge and White Cliffs," Ms Houssos said.

"This matter dates back to 2015 and we want it resolved quickly.

"I want to particularly thank Roy Butler for his efforts over many years to represent both miners and landholders in Lightning Ridge and White Cliffs. He has consistently raised local issues with the Government and has played a valuable role since the uncovering of this legacy license issue.

"I am receiving daily updates as validation of titles occurs and am focused on getting this resolved to get miners back onto their claims as quickly as possible, in compliance with the Mining Act.

"I am looking forward to hearing first-hand from miners and landholders and how they can be supported by the Government.

"I once again acknowledge and apologise for the disruption that has occurred."

Ms Houssos today announced the establishment of a refund scheme covering the administrative levy and fees paid in respect of the application for the grant of mineral claims, and any subsequent renewal application fees.

"We believe those who were impacted by this administrative error should be refunded as a way to support them in getting back to work," Ms Houssos said.

"As soon as this issue was uncovered, we deployed additional departmental resources. We are focused on ensuring miners can return to their claims as soon as possible, and landholders and communities have the security and certainty they need."

Information about the refunds will be on the Department's website shortly and affected miners will start to receive correspondence from the Department about the refunds from next week.

Roy Butler and Stephen Lawrence will work closely together on this matter.

Ms Houssos said Mr Lawrence, a barrister with critical local knowledge as a former mayor of Dubbo, would bring a wealth of experience and strengthen the Government's efforts.

“Stephen will be on the ground to fully engage with stakeholders. I know Roy Butler will also continue to actively advocate for his constituents.”

Mr Lawrence will commence his duties as envoy immediately.

“As a passionate advocate of the region, I am looking forward to working with local stakeholders to discuss their issues so that we can look to create a long-term plan for stability and certainty for the opal industry,” Mr Lawrence said.

As part of her visit, Ms Houssos also announced an independent review into the current statutory framework for administration and regulation of small-scale opal titles and establishment of a refund scheme covering.

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