

Deseal/reseal inquiry seeks submissions

The parliamentary inquiry into the RAAF's F-111 deseal/reseal maintenance program has begun and disclosed its terms of reference. It is calling for submissions, which should be made to the Defence Subcommittee Secretariat.

The inquiry will examine:

- the adequacy of eligibility periods, ex-gratia payments and the health benefits provided to date; and
- the decision-making process relating to ex-gratia payments and compensation claims.

The F-111 deseal/reseal program exposed about 700 RAAF personnel and civilians to a range of chemicals and solvents when replacing sealant in the aircrafts' fuel tanks. The inquiry is a response to the public concerns of the F-111 Deseal/Reseal Support Group.

The inquiry is being conducted by the Defence Subcommittee of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade. The committee will hold its first public hearing on July 21 and is scheduled to deliver its report on October 23.

The inquiry, chaired by Arch Bevis, will have the power to examine all aspects of the previous government's response to the Study of Health Outcomes in Aircraft Maintenance Personnel (SHOAMP).

The committee will consider:

- if the range of health benefits and eligibility periods under the health-care scheme were adequate compared with other schemes;
- if the ex-gratia payments offered were adequate, given the findings of the SHOAMP study;
- how the payments related to benefits under the Health Care Scheme;
- if they were consistent with one-off



A technician works inside one of the F-111 tanks. This picture was taken in 2005.

payments to other veteran groups

- the appropriateness, timeliness and transparency of the over-all handling and administration of ex-gratia payments; and
- compensation claims by participants and their families.

If the committee determines that any of these aspects was inadequate, it will recommend what alternatives should be considered to provide an adequate response to former deseal/reseal workers and their families.

The Government says it will continue to meet the health and support needs of deseal/reseal workers and their families while the committee examines these issues.

The terms of reference are listed below. Submissions are now being called for and should be made by June 26 to the Defence Sub-Committee Secretariat Parliament House Canberra ACT 2602 or emailed to jscfadt@aph.gov.au.

For information, telephone the secretariat on 02 6277 4466.

New house owners' scheme incentive to stay on

The new ADF Defence Home Ownership Assistance Scheme (DHOAS) was scheduled to come into operation from July 1.

Legislation has been agreed in the House of Representatives and is now subject to passage through the Senate, expected by June 26.

The Defence Home Ownership Assistance Scheme is one of a number of initiatives to encourage ADF personnel to serve longer.

The Minister for Defence Science and Personnel, Warren Snowdon, said the scheme recognised loyalty and dedication with progressively higher home-loan subsidies to permanent members who served beyond the critical separation points of 4, 8 and 12 years, and reservists with service past 8 years.

ADF personnel will have a choice of three providers, each of which has undertaken as part of the tender process to offer products equal to or better than available in the general market.

The successful home loan provider panel members are:

- National Australia Bank Limited;
- Australian Defence Credit Union Limited; and
- Defence Force Credit Union Limited.

Mr Snowdon said, "The new scheme treats all partners of deceased equally.

"Spouses will inherit the same subsidy entitlements the deceased held, and in fact waive the four-year qualifying period. This applies to the partners of all deceased regardless of the circumstances of death."

Inquiry's terms of reference — and how to have your say

Terms of reference for parliamentary inquiry into claims for compensation by former F-111 deseal/reseal workers and government responses.

The committee will investigate and review claims for compensation by former F-111 deseal/reseal workers including the Commonwealth's response to the health and support needs of former F-111 deseal/reseal workers and their families. The committee should ascertain whether the response was adequate, whether it was consistent with the findings of the Study of Health Outcomes in Aircraft Maintenance Personnel (SHOAMP) and whether the over-all administration and handling of the program was adequate.

Answers wanted

The Inquiry will consider the adequacy and equity of the Health Care Scheme in meeting the health and support needs of participants and their families and whether this was consistent with the SHOAMP findings. Matters to be considered will include but not be limited to:

- The differences, and transitional arrangements, between the interim health scheme and the final Health Care Scheme;
- The timing of cessation of access to

the Health Care Scheme;

- The range of treatment and health benefits provided under the Health Care Scheme;
- Whether the current Health Care Scheme is consistent with the range of treatment and health benefits available to persons under other Health Care Schemes;
- The adequacy of arrangements under the Health Care Scheme affected family members (including widows) or serving members; and
- If the Health Care Scheme is not considered to be an adequate response to the health and support needs of participants and their families, consider and report on possible alternatives that are considered to be adequate in light of the findings of SHOAMP and other Health Care Schemes.

The Inquiry will consider the adequacy and equity of the financial element of the Ex Gratia Scheme and whether it was consistent with (i) the findings of SHOAMP, (ii) the Health Care Scheme response (iii) the Tier definitions, and (iv) one-off payments to other veteran groups. The Inquiry will consider, but not be limited to:

- Whether the lump sums available under the ex gratia scheme were appropriate;

- Whether the lump sums available were appropriate given the findings of the SHOAMP;
- Whether the lump sums, when considered along with the benefits available under the Health Care Scheme, were appropriate;
- Whether the lump sums available under the ex-gratia scheme were appropriated range of benefits and compensation available under other Commonwealth or state statutory schemes;
- Whether the lump sums were consistent with the definitions of tiers of participants;
- Whether the lump sums were consistent with other one-off payments made to veteran groups;
- When assessing the question of adequate remedies, whether regard should be given to the establishment of a dedicated administrative assessment and settlement scheme; and
- If the lump sums available under the ex-gratia scheme are not considered to be financially adequate, discuss what compensatory payment would be appropriate in light of the SHOAMP findings, other one-off payments made to veteran groups, and the full range of benefits and compensation available under other Commonwealth and state statutory

schemes or common-law damages available under Australian law

The Inquiry will consider whether the over-all handling and administration of ex-gratia and compensation claims was appropriate, timely and transparent for both participants and their families. The Inquiry will consider whether, but not be limited to:

- Cross agency cooperation was effective;
- The documentation and records held by both Agencies as they relate to Deseal/Reseal activities was adequate;
- The standard of evidence required to substantiate a claim was reasonable and, if not, whether alternative standards of proof may be used when making an eligibility determination;
- There has been equitable treatment of service personnel, public servants, civilian employees and contractors involved in deseal/reseal activities;
- Staffing resources were adequate to produce a timely result;
- There were unreasonable delays in the process, taking into account the complex nature of issues; and
- The over-all handling and administration of ex gratia and compensation claims was appropriate and timely.