PRESS STATEMENT:

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PORTLAND WOOL SALES CONFERENCE

By now, it is widely known that last week a conference called by the Premier to discuss Portland wool sales was held but that no agreement could be reached at the Conference and, as a consequence, the Premier said he would hold an economic inquiry into the justification of Portland's case. I thought it might be of interest if I recapitulate what happened but first, may I say that I am grateful to the Opposition for having made a pair available to me for this important meeting.

I do not pretend that my presence made any difference to the outcome of the Conference but since I have lived with the Portland issue from the very moment that the Commonwealth decided to sell the wool store, I particularly wanted to be present at this Conference which was important to the cause. I want to see this Portland matter through to its successful conclusion if it is humanly possible.

Also let me say that the other member of the Woolgrowers' deputation who was present, Bob McClure, added a great deal of strength to the Portland case. This may be one of the few cases in which people who belong to different political parties have worked as a team in a matter of some importance. I think this is also evidence of the fact that, so far as Western Victoria is concerned, Portland is not a party political issue.

Now, let me get down to the Conference.

The Premier, of course, was in the Chair. The Hon. R. W. Mack, M.L.C. was present and, as you know, Bob McClure and myself represented the growers. Mr. Gale and Mr. Strachan represented the National Council of Wool Selling Brokers. Mr. Lempriere and Mr. Greenwood represented the Australian Council of Wool Buyers.

I was very pleased that, at the outset of the meeting, the Premier made his own views quite plain. He supported the Portland case and argued strongly in its favour; so also did Ron Mack. The Premier could not have been of more help to the woolgrower representatives.

The discussion took place for one and a half hours. It was mostly concerned with the attitudes of different sections of the industry. The Premier began by making his position known. Then Bob McClure and myself briefly summarised Portland's claims, after which the discussion went ahead on general lines. Neither the buyers nor the brokers brought forward any new arguments. They rested their case on matters that have been well publicised over the last twelve months.

Because of recent figures that I had obtained from Commonwealth statistical sources I was able to show that Portland is adjacent to an area that produces more wool than almost any other area in Australia. Some interesting analogies could be made. There is a wool selling centre at Albany, for instance, that serves an area that produces about 150,000 or 160,000 bales of wool. Tasmania has two selling centres that service about 100,000 bales of wool. If a selling centre were established at Portland, the area it would logically serve produces 455,000 bales and this is all within 150 miles of Portland. It is interesting to note that, over the last ten years, this area - within 150 miles of Portland - has increased its wool production from 250,000 bales to about 455,000 bales. In compiling these figures, all those areas that were nearer Geelong than Portland were excluded. It should be noted that this rate of increase is much greater.
than Australia’s average. Indeed, it could well be the greatest rate of increase in production of any area in Australia. It is certainly the most productive woolgrowing area that has not got its own wool selling centre.

The other areas in Australia which produce the largest quantities of wool probably are found in certain areas of New South Wales. They are served by four selling centres – Albury, Goulburn, Sydney and Newcastle. Two of these selling centres are not on a harbour and the wool has to be handled after sale to take it to the ships.

I have always known that Western Victoria was magnificent woolgrowing country, but before examining these figures I had not realised the more than significant part that this area plays in Australia’s overall wool production.

I brought these arguments forward at the meeting together with other arguments which are well known to people in this area. There is no point in recapitulating the arguments that were used at the meeting but I may say that the discussion was, in general, on a high plane. The matter was discussed, in general, calmly. However, no agreement could be reached. No concessions were offered. There was no sign of compromise from the brokers or the buyers.

When it became clear that the Conference would not achieve any positive result, the Premier said that the matter could not be allowed to rest. He wanted to see wool sales at Portland. Since the brokers and the buyers had based their opposition on economic grounds, and since these grounds were disputed by those arguing in Portland’s favour, the Premier said that an independent economic inquiry would be held into the position of Portland as a centre for wool sales. He indicated that moves would be established to get such an inquiry appointed as soon as possible.

I am confident of the outcome of such an inquiry because I believe I have examined the economics of this matter with an open mind and it is my belief that the economics strongly favour Portland’s case. However, these matters will be discussed in an open inquiry and the truth of the position will become known. There must, of course, be some degree of risk that an inquiry will find against our interests but if we have belief in our own judgments, if we are confident of our case – as we are, we should be and are prepared to have it examined by an impartial scrutiny.

A great deal of work will have to be done in preparing Portland’s case, in documenting the evidence and in making sure that no loopholes are overlooked. I am sure this will be done. I have already told the Managing Director of Portland Wool Brokers that if I can be of any help in preparing this evidence I will be more than happy to do so. I have already begun to obtain material from the Bureau of Agricultural Economics and from our Statistical Department at Canberra which I think will be of help.

Both Bob McClure and myself agreed after the meeting that the Premier could not have been of more assistance to us. He made his own views plain. He wanted wool sales at Portland. He made this fact known to the brokers and the buyers. I hope that the morale of woolgrowers will be lifted by the outcome of this Conference. Although it has not achieved any positive result in the sense that an agreement was reached, it has, nevertheless, brought to light the full support of the Premier and that means something in a struggle of this kind. In addition, this independent inquiry will keep the matter moving. It will serve to have the arguments for and against Portland examined in an impartial manner and it will enable the untruths that have been spoken about Portland to be put to rest once and for all. For example, it is still being said and it was said at the meeting that wool sold at Portland would have to be sold f.o.b. Melbourne. Such is simply not the case. At the inquiry it will be possible to demonstrate that it is not the case.
If the inquiry finds in favour of Portland, as I believe it will from my own examination of the facts, I think it will be difficult indeed for the brokers and the buyers to maintain their opposition.

I would also like to draw attention to the fact that the Victorian Wheat and Woolgrowers' Association has given repeated and strong support to the Portland cause, and at its recent State Conference it passed a resolution urging the establishment of such an independent inquiry failing a successful Conference. In addition to this, the Australian Woolgrowers' and Graziers' Council, on the initiative of the South Australian Stockowners' Association, have asked that such an inquiry into the justification of Portland as a centre for selling wool should be held. The Australian Primary Producers' Union has also supported the Portland case. Thus, there is a real degree of agreement between woolgrower organizations not only on a State level but also on a Federal level. The brokers and the buyers should also take some note of this greater support.

We believe the Portland case rests on firm ground, and the growers' deputation is glad that the case is to be tested by an independent inquiry. From its very first meeting with the Premier the deputation had asked for an independent inquiry to be held believing that the brokers and the buyers would not be prepared to compromise round the table. Although every effort to convince them that this should be done was made in a friendly and positive manner no compromise was forthcoming and thus we have the inquiry.