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## Team makes call for help

North West Star, Mount Isa

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BY STEPH ALLEN

A NORTH Queensland delegation of political leaders and industry professionals descended on Canberra on Thursday, July 31, calling on the federal government to deliver financial backing to save the Mount Isa copper smelter and Townsville refinery, as well as 17,000 jobs across the region.

After months of negotiations with the state government, Glencore confirmed preparations were underway to place both assets into care and maintenance by September.

Glencore intermin CEO of Queensland Metals Troy Wilson said while copper operations faced uncertainty, the company was investing \$2.5 billion in the region over six years for projects including the George Fisher zinc, lead and silver mine, the Black Star Open Cut zinc, copper and silver project, and the Tailings Reprocessing Project. "We believe in a really strong future for the North Queensland resource sector...and we're investing heavily into it," he said.

A Glencore spokesperson said the company said there would be a projected total loss of \$2.2bn over the next seven years, from 2025 to 2031. "No mine lasts forever and after more than 70 years our underground copper mining operations in Mount Isa have reached the end of their economic life," they said.

The spokesperson said

that in the case of federal funding, it would commit to continuing copper operations if the financial gap was addressed. "We want to keep running them if a regional solution can be found," they said.

However, Mount Isa City Council mayor Peta MacRae said the investments would not replace the economic significance of the copper smelter. "The closure would put our economic ecosystem into a death spiral," she said. "Without our smelter, there's no sulphuric acid for the phosphate, and without that phosphate in the fertiliser, you will not have the agricultural industry in Queensland and in the nation that we have today.

"It will affect our ability to produce food. It will also affect the railway, the port, and our mines."

A decision on the smelter's future must be made by the end of September.

Heeding Glencore's deadline, a group including Townsville Enterprise CEO Claudia Brumme-Smith, Cr MacRae, Federal Member for Dawson and Shadow Minister for manufacturing and sovereign Andrew Willcox, MITEZ CEO Maria James, Traeger MP Robbie Katter, KAP leader Bob Katter, and industry workers travelled to Parliament House on Thursday.

Their core message to the federal government about the importance of the infra-

structure and the potential flow-on effects to many industries across the region came after funding negotiations between Glencore and the state government were unable to meet a resolution. "We are holding out breath and anxious for an outcome," Ms Brumme-Smith said.

Cr MacRae said Mount Isa had quietly powered the state and the national economy for generations. "For over 60 years, the Mount Isa Copper Smelter and Townsville Copper Refinery have underpinned Queensland's manufacturing capability and built the infrastructure, services, and communities that many now take for granted," she said.

"This is our moment of need...If Australia walks away from refining and processing [copper] here, we are handing over control to others who do not share our values or strategic interests. Our people are proud and hardworking, and they rarely ask for help."

Days previous, Ms Brumme-Smith had stood at the gates of the mine as 700 copper miners finished their final shift. "Ten years ago, I witnessed the economic fallout when QNI closed. I don't want to be standing at those gates again when 17,000 direct and indirect workers lose their livelihoods," she said. "It's time for action."

One of those workers was Cameron Gibson, who had worked at the Mount Isa

mine for 32 years - following in his father's footsteps. "This is pretty close to my heart... This is not about a company, it's not about politics, this is about just saving a community, saving rural and remote Australia," he said. "If we let the interior die...you guys down in Canberra and down on the seaboard, you won't have your food."

The Glencore spokesperson said while the company had welcomed a recent offer from the Queensland government, there was nothing on the table from the federal government. "We are determined to keep engaging with both the federal and Queensland governments to advocate for a support package that enables the smelter and refinery to continue operating and allows them to continue benefitting the whole region. But we are running out of time," they said.

Robbie Katter said it was important to have Glencore, the state, and the federal governments in the same room, "making a deal now". "This isn't just about jobs, it's about national security," he said. "China is closing in on global copper markets. If we walk away from this, we're giving up one of our last strategic assets in the north."

Ms Brumme-Smith said without an urgent financial rescue package from the federal government, the region faced a "catastrophic economic and social fallout - including an unemployment



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rate of up to 18 per cent". "Every day, I see the fear in the eyes of families who don't know what tomorrow brings," she said. "Copper is essential to the global energy transition, defence, and manufacturing."

Mr Willcox said without

the copper smelter, the Townsville copper refinery would also be lost. He raised concerns about the future of the industry, with Australia holding "10pc of the world's known copper reserves".

"Copper is so important for our sovereign capability

in Australia; for electronic goods, for electrification, and for defence," he said. "If we vacate this space, this will allow countries like China to move straight in. Already the manufacturing industry in China is being supported by their government."



Member for Traeger Robbie Katter, Mount Isa City Council mayor Peta MacRae, and Townsville Enterprise CEO Claudie Brumme-Smith with industry workers at Parliament House in Canberra. Picture supplied.



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Claudie Brumme-Smith  
with Mount Isa mayor Peta  
MacRae.