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Mt Isa awaits lifeline

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Southern smelter bailouts

Ellen Ransley

The federal government is under renewed pressure to throw North Queensland the next lifeline, after a \$135m bail-out plan was announced for two smelters in South Australia and Tasmania.

Nyrstar’s struggling Port Pirie and Hobart zinc and lead operations will remain open after the federal government agreed to tip in \$57.5m, with the states to make up the rest.

Coupled with the company’s own investment, the money will go towards accelerating a pilot plant to test critical minerals production and give the company time to ensure its long-term viability as China distorts the metals market – which has already prompted a \$2.4bn bailout of SA’s Whyalla steelworks earlier this year.

In the wake of the latest government package, Townsville

Enterprise chief executive Claudia Brumme said she hoped something similar would soon be put on the table to safeguard Glencore’s Mount Isa smelter and Townsville refinery, where 17,000 jobs are on the line.

This comes as the Keep Our Copper delegation returns from Canberra.

“More than ever, we need a similar announcement in a very short period of time. We’re not asking for anything more or less than for the doors to stay open while the government works on a long-term smelter strategy,” she said.

“We welcome the Nyrstar announcement, but we need something similar for North Queensland. We’re five minutes to midnight and we need something soon.”

Ms Brumme said this was

not just a Queensland issue, but a national issue.

“Copper is fundamental to modern life – it powers everything from the solar panels on our roofs to the smartphones in our hands, and the transmission lines that connect our cities,” she said.

“As the world races to decarbonise, copper has become the backbone of the global energy transition.”

Queensland Mines Minister Dale Last said the state had put a “genuine and responsible” offer on the table, and it was pushing the federal government to “step up”.

Glencore has reportedly asked for a \$2bn package over 10 years to keep its doors open, which the federal government has so far resisted even as the mining giant put its Mount Isa smelter into care and mainten-

ance last month.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese last week demanded Glencore “back the town that has backed them”.

A spokesman for federal Industry Minister Tim Ayres said the government remains “actively engaged with Glencore and the Queensland government, and are committed to continuing constructive discussions”.

“Our goal is to work together towards a viable solution that supports workers, communities, and the future of the industry,” the spokesman said, adding the recent Nyrstar announcement came after months of “constructive collaboration”.