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Relocation must be justified before jobs moved out of Canberra

Canberra Business Chamber has hit out at plans to make Commonwealth departments prove why they should be allowed to remain in the ACT or face relocation.

“It shouldn’t be the work of departments to justify their location, but the job of the Federal Government itself. Only if the economic benefits stack up should moving a department be considered, and based on experience to date this is not the case,” Canberra Business Chamber CEO, Robyn Hendry said.

The Federal Government yesterday announced that ministers will be required to justify whether agencies within their portfolios should remain where they are.

“The criteria for this assessment has not been released, but we demand it include evidence that benefits outweigh all costs, including the impact on the current location, and this information be made public,” Ms Hendry said.

“With the move of the AVPMA from Canberra, the cost-benefit analysis suggested it could cost the agricultural crop sector between \$64 million and \$193 million per year due to loss of experienced staff and delays in approval of new chemical products. The study found no material economic advantages to support the relocation.”

Canberra Business Chamber argues that as the national capital and seat of the Australian Parliament, the ACT must be natural home for major Commonwealth departments.

“Our nation’s capital must continue to be Australia’s centralised decision-making hub, the heart of policy creation,” Ms Hendry said. “Moving departments from Canberra will dislocate them from the very machinery of government – which seems to be less productive and effective.

“Policy development and implementation cannot happen in a vacuum, it needs input from stakeholders. Many industry NGOs are based in Canberra and contribute to development of effective policies. Public sector staff can build and maintain the networks they need to do their jobs successfully. If departments are relocated, travel expenses will increase as staff have to travel to Canberra or other cities for day-to-day meetings and coordination.”

Canberra Business Chamber believes the ACT region should be viewed as a regional centre when making decisions about relocation.

“The argument is that government departments can drive regional employment and we would say that is as true for our region as any other.

“People from Goulburn, Yass, Queanbeyan, Murrumbateman and Cooma Monaro all work in Canberra. Relocating departments from the ACT would hurt our region. While our reliance on the Commonwealth for employment is lessening, it is still one of the main industries in our region.

“Relocating departments from the ACT region would be like moving the National Disability Insurance Authority office from Geelong to Wagga Wagga – simply shifting from one regional centre to another.

“The Canberra Business Chamber is not opposed to initiatives that will drive regional employment, we just don’t want the Commonwealth to overlook the fact that we are a regional area.

“Therefore, we are calling on the Federal Government to commit to keeping policy departments in the ACT and only consider moving service agencies currently located outside of Canberra when there is a strong justification for doing so.”

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