

KISS OF LIFE IN REGIONS

Premier vows to fight for South East, says sorry for selling forests

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PREMIER Peter Malinauskas has apologised for Labor privatising the South-East's forests on his first trip outside Adelaide as state leader, visiting Mt Gambier to recommit to a \$100m funding package for the region.

Keeping a pre-election promise to tour the state's second-largest city within 72 hours of being sworn in, Mr Malinauskas on Wednesday outlined funding of more than \$50m for health in the region, including \$24m to upgrade Mt Gambier Hospital, and \$35m to build a technical college in the city.

Praising the Limestone Coast as an agricultural economic powerhouse, Mr Malinauskas visited rock lobster fishing operations at Port MacDonnell hit by Chinese trade sanctions.

He also toured a thriving Mt Gambier sawmill that is hunting for more skilled workers.

After visiting the city's hospital, Mr Malinauskas apologised for the previous Labor government selling off the region's state-owned forests.

"I think selling the forests was wrong but we can't go back in time, we can only go forward," Mr Malinauskas said.

"I think this part of the state has been ignored by previous governments of both sides and I'm seeking to put an end to that."

Mr Malinauskas then went to Port MacDonnell, visiting family-owned business operators at Limestone Coast Fishermen's Co-operative and going aboard a cray boat, Brojak, in the harbour.

Co-operative director Chris Sealy told the new Premier Chinese trade sanctions had slashed the price of cray from up to \$95/kg to about \$40/kg.

But he said fishing costs worked out to be about \$37/kg as diesel and other prices soared.

Asked how much smaller operators such as him were making now, Mr Sealy said: "Bugger all."

Mr Malinauskas outlined his government's plans for \$2.6m of licence fee relief in

2022-23 for cray fishermen, which Mr Sealy said he planned to put towards equipment for his boat that he had not been able to afford. Mr Malinauskas said because of Chinese trade sanctions, without fee relief people faced losing small businesses that had been operated by families for generations.

“If we’re not willing to look after these people in a trade war, well, who are we willing to look after?” he said.

Aboard Brojak, Brodie Williams, 23, told the Premier the past two years had been the best rock lobster seasons since his grandfather started cray fishing in the 1940s.

“Last year was the best anyone has ever seen it and this year was better again,” he said.

“If the trade war wasn’t a thing and affecting our prices, these two years would have been the best ever.”

It was the Premier’s first trip to the regions since Labor’s landslide win at Saturday’s election over Steven Marshall’s Liberal government.

Labor on January 21 promised a \$24m Mount Gambier Hospital upgrade, \$3.5m for community drug and alcohol services and \$7.4m to fund 24 additional paramedics for the region.

It said the extra ambulance officers would be in place by July 2024 with a 24/7 crew located in Mount Gambier plus 12-hour regional transfer crews in Mount Gambier and Keith.

The \$24m Mount Gambier Hospital funding would include an \$8m emergency department redevelopment, \$11.4m on six new mentalhealth unit beds and \$4.6m for two drug and alcohol detox beds.

A \$3.5m commitment towards four new community drug and alcohol beds in the regional city would prevent patients “getting bogged down in the ED”, Labor promised at the time.