
ATSIC fury at dole program failures

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ATSIC commissioner Kim Hill has slammed the administrators of Aboriginal work-for-the dole programs that have collapsed amid allegations of financial misappropriation and mismanagement, for not alerting ATSIC board members to the problems earlier.

Mr Hill said that the failure of the programs, revealed by The Weekend Australian on Saturday, had further damaged the reputation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission and the funding body, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services.

"A lot of questions have to be asked of the administration arms of ATSIC and ATSI," Mr Hill said.

"It doesn't surprise me one bit that this has happened because when matters are brought to the attention of the elected arm and we report it, they (the administration) sometimes think we have a conflict of interest and it becomes too political and nothing gets done," Mr Hill said.

"People have a perception out there that we can't do anything, and things like this make this worse."

Financial administrators have been called in to run about 19 taxpayer-funded Community Development Employment Programs as investigations are launched into the operations of at least another six programs.

It is understood the work-for-the-dole programs have left debts of at least \$2 million, and there could be many millions more lost or misappropriated over the past few years.

Mr Hill said he welcomed the radical overhaul that the CDEP program was about to undergo but said he would like to see more money going into projects rather than administration. Embattled Aboriginal leader "Sugar" Ray Robinson, who resigned as ATSIC's deputy chairman in June but remains an ATSIC commissioner, has called on ATSI chief executive officer Wayne Gibbons to step down.

Mr Robinson said the administration of the CDEP program had been a "total mess" since ATSI took over.

"When ATSIC was in charge of it, it was going quite well," Mr Robinson said.

"Wayne Gibbons needs to step down right away."

But, while many programs have run into problems, Thule Farm, a once derelict property bought by the Indigenous Land Corporation is a shining example of the CDEP working as it was intended.

The project has helped slash the unemployment rate among the Flinders Island Aboriginal community from 90 per cent to about 5 per cent -- lower than that of wider Tasmania.

Dozens of indigenous people have worked there learning skills ranging from shearing to animal husbandry.

“We had volunteers up there every weekend. I don’t think there would be an Aboriginal family on Flinders who hasn’t worked on Thule at some time,” said local community leader Maxine Roughley.

Thule is one of the work-for-the-dole schemes that probably won’t need many of the major reforms earmarked by ATSI for much of the \$450million Australia-wide CDEP project.