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The Australian Rangeland Society

The Leigh Creek Transition: Moving From Closed Town to Regional Hub

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How do you transition a remote closed mining-town to a sustainable, regional service centre?

This was the dilemma facing the South Australian State Government in mid-2015, when Alinta Energy announced it was ceasing its Flinders Operations. Coal extraction from the Leigh Creek open cut mine would end within months, and closure of the Port Augusta Power Station would follow suit shortly after, posing significant challenges, all with enormous social and economic effects.

To set the scene: Leigh Creek is a planned and laid out town, some 550km north of Adelaide, situated in a natural arid amphitheatre, in a picturesque part of the Northern Flinders Ranges. The town would not look out of place in metropolitan Adelaide. Leigh Creek is the anti-outback town, with footpaths, sealed roads, street lighting, an Olympic-sized swimming pool, sprung floor stadium and the greenest oval in the Outback. There is also an all-weather airport with dual runways, long enough to land a 737, kerbside rubbish collection and a landfill facility.

The town was built in the early 1980s, and has been a closed town for decades. With no incentive to invite the outside world in, it was poorly signed and inward facing.

Presented with three options; close the town, create a Regional Government Service hub or create a revitalised township, the State Government expressed a clear desire for Leigh Creek to remain a service hub, providing essential services to over 700 community members, pastoralists, business operators and service providers living in the Northern Flinders Ranges that allowed for revitalisation.

Enter Leigh Creek Futures: a committee, chaired by Dr Jane Lomax-Smith, ex-Minister for Tourism; engaged by the Premier to progress the town revitalisation by building social capacity and by promoting the town as being 'Open for Business'. Since officially reverting to State Government management on 1 January 2017, Leigh Creek is very much a town in transition to becoming a self-sustaining service hub for the Northern Flinders region.

Significant work has been undertaken to transfer responsibilities for different aspects of the township to relevant government agencies; for example the reverse osmosis water reticulation system to SA Water, the housing and infrastructure to the Department of Planning, Transport and Infrastructure. The Outback Communities Authority would take on the town administration role and continue to deliver all municipal services in a 'business as usual' manner.

The township is on the way to becoming a vibrant, tourist-friendly town; Leigh Creek is in the heart of the Northern Flinders Ranges and the perfect hub for tourists to discover the many cultural, environmental and aesthetic attractions nearby.