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# Revive Hunter defence industry: Fitzgibbon

By SAM RIGNEY

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Forgacs warned on Thursday the company would have to lay off hundreds of skilled workers in 18 months unless the federal government made a decision on future naval hardware projects.

HUNTER MP Joel Fitzgibbon has renewed the push to develop the region as a national defence force hub in the wake of Forgacs announcing fears for its 900 shipbuilding workforce.

The *Newcastle Herald* reported on Thursday that Forgacs Chief Executive Lindsay Stratton had warned the company would have to lay off hundreds of skilled workers in 18 months unless the federal government made a decision on future naval hardware projects.

He said the Defence White Paper, which presents the government's long-term strategic direction and is scheduled to be released early next year, would be too late.

Mr Fitzgibbon said on Thursday the Forgas situation was a reminder the state government had provided plenty of talk but never seriously sought to build a defence hub in the Hunter.

“For a while we were having a go,” Mr Fitzgibbon said.

“As defence minister I worked with then Hunter MP Jodi McKay who in turn appointed former Deputy Chief of the Air Force John Blackburn to drive a defence hub strategy.

“But the burst of energy did not survive the next election.

“By contrast, a decade ago the South Australian government recognised its motor vehicle and white-good industries, its key economic base - were in freefall.

“In response, it aggressively pursued defence industry opportunities, particularly in maritime.

“The well calibrated gamble paid off and among other things, South Australia is now home to the air warfare destroyer build and will undoubtedly be the place of assembly and fit-out for the next generation of submarines - a project which will surpass the Joint Strike Fighter as our most expensive defence project.”

That was 2009, but since then the Hunter Business Chamber and Hunter Net have developed the Hunter Defence Strategy, aimed at expanding Williamtown RAAF base and Singleton army base and better utilising the Newcastle port for navy and manufacturing operations.

But the ambitious plan, which aimed to get the Hunter a bigger slice of the national defence industry pie, appears to have stalled.

Mr Fitzgibbon said there were still plenty of opportunities that would allow the Hunter to retain a key manufacturing base well into the future.

“Imagine a Hunter Valley, already home to the Singleton Infantry Centre and Williamtown RAAF that was building army truck modules and Joint Strike Fighter components, servicing jet fighters, new air warfare destroyers, large troop ships and air-to-air refuelers and building and/or servicing the assets of the New Zealand Navy,” he said.

“It’s an optimistic picture, and certainly none of it will be realised without hard work.”



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