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F-35A fighters a boost to region

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OPTIMISTIC: Hunternet defence project manager Ian Dick and Air Vice Marshal Kym Osley at Fort Scratchley.

THE Williamtown RAAF base runway will be extended by about 300metres towards Raymond Terrace as part of a \$1 billion upgrade to prepare for the F-35A Joint Strike Fighters.

About 140 people at a Hunternet defence conference at Fort Scratchley yesterday heard a range of defence chiefs outline the opportunities the F-35s would offer to the private sector.

As well as the \$1 billion base upgrade, the RAAF has confirmed that increasing amounts of maintenance and training would be done by private contractors.

Hunternet defence project manager and conference organiser Ian Dick said Hunter companies would have to compete on price and quality to win work on the F-35s, which were likely to attract new “higher tier” contractors to the region.

Mr Dick said Hunter defence companies were optimistic about the future, especially after the recent federal budget.

“We’ll be competing alongside Geelong and Adelaide and those sorts of cities, as we always do, but hopefully other shipbuilding contracts coming along as well, we won’t have the ‘valley of death’,” Mr Dick said, referring to a much-feared gap in naval contracts.

The opening day of the two-day conference coincided with a visit to Forcacs Tomago by opposition defence spokesman Stephen Conroy, who called on the federal government to commit to the shipping contracts that would maintain Australia’s shipbuilding skills.

The head of the RAAF’s F-35A transition team, Air Vice-Marshal Kym Osley, said “almost \$1billion” in construction and infrastructure work would be done at Williamtown between next year and 2021.

Air Vice-Marshal Osley said most of the 72 planes in the \$15 billion contract would be based at Williamtown, replacing the F/A-18s used by three of the base’s squadrons.

He said the number of RAAF employees at Williamtown would not increase but more maintenance and support tasks would be contracted out to the private sector, including F-35A pilot training.

RAAF Group Captain Mick Brown said an earlier plan to extend the runway over Meadowie Road to the south-east had been rejected by a parliamentary committee and negotiations were under way with the Hunter Water Board to extend the runway on its land to the north-west.

Group Captain Brown said a longer runway would allow the F-35A to take off at less than full power, making for quieter operation.

He said the largest environmental impact study the RAAF had ever done went to the federal environment department in April and was likely to be put on public display as early as next month.

A parliamentary committee would hold public hearings for the Williamstown expansion in July or August.

Air Vice-Marshal Osley acknowledged a long-running debate over the quality and capabilities of the F-35 but had been heavily involved in the program and believed the “fifth-generation” fighters were the “crown jewels of US military technology”.