

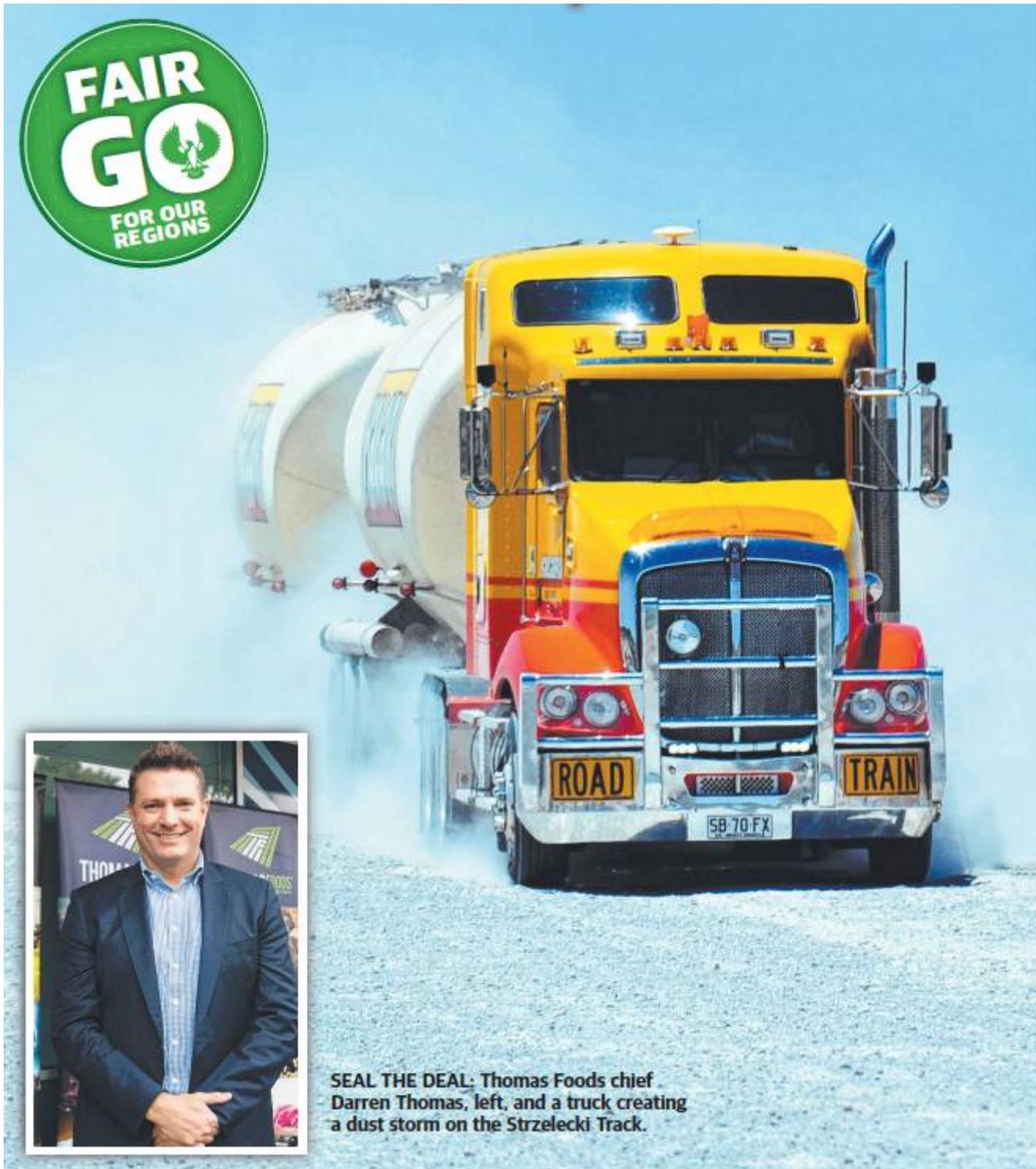
FOR TRUCKS' SAKE

Thomas Foods chief joins calls to seal famous Outback track

PAULA THOMPSON

REGIONAL EDITOR

THOMAS Foods International chief executive Darren Thomas is joining the



SEAL THE DEAL: Thomas Foods chief Darren Thomas, left, and a truck creating a dust storm on the Strzelecki Track.

SEAL THE DEAL: Thomas Foods chief Darren Thomas, left, and a truck creating a dust storm on the Strzelecki Track.

fight to have the Strzelecki Track sealed.

Fresh from revealing a multi-million-dollar commitment to rebuilding his company's Murray Bridge abattoir after a devastating fire, Mr Thomas has called on the Federal Government to pledge to seal the famous Outback road.

He said crucial to his abattoir's extraordinary rebuild – which will create hundreds of jobs – would be growing its capacity by sourcing new cattle suppliers, including Queensland farmers.

Mr Thomas said sealing the Strzelecki Track would make it easier for the company to import cattle out of Queensland.

He has joined the chorus of voices calling on the Government to take action.

"If sealing of the Strzelecki Track could be done, it would give the people of southwest Queensland a wonderful opportunity to market their product," he said.

Before the fire, Thomas Foods was processing about 1200 cattle a day.

That figure is expected to rise to about 1400.

With the abattoir rebuild cost running into hundreds of millions of dollars, Mr Thomas said the company had shown its commitment to the agricultural sector, so it would be pleasing to see a similar commitment from the Government. In building up its cattle capacity, Mr Thomas said growth of the company's feedlot at Tintinara would play a key part.

The feedlot was known as Iranda but it will now be renamed Southern Cross Feedlot, with growing employment opportunities.

"To create 30 full-time jobs in a small town like Tintinara can only be positive," Mr Thomas said. "At the moment, we have 18,000 cattle on feed there and we're looking to grow that to 35,000 on the back of strong demand for our grain-fed products, particularly from Europe and China."

While grain-fed beef is often seen as a lesser alternative to grass-fed in the Australian market, Mr Thomas said it was the opposite in a number of overseas markets.

"There's a particular demand in the high-end space, some of our animals can spend up to 270 days on grain for the Chinese market," he said.

"The increase in the feedlot capacity is key in this project. so the rebuild is not only a significant investment in the Murray Bridge region, but also the Upper South-East."

Mr Thomas said the feedlot would also offer benefits to local farmers, with the need to source good grain and hay supplies for the site.

He said as well as good demand for grain-fed cattle in overseas markets, there had also been a huge increase in demand for organic meat, which generally came from the northern pastoral areas.