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**MEDIA RELEASE:**

**2009 SURFEST SET FOR MARCH TAKE-OFF**

**Merewether, Newcastle, Australia (Thursday, December 18, 2008)**

AUSTRALIA'S largest surfing festival, SURFEST, will fire up for the 24th time at Newcastle's Merewether beach next March.

In 2009, the jewels in the Surfest crown will be two World Qualifying Series (WQS) events - the \$37,000 AUD 2-star Mark Richards Pro for men and the \$18,000 AUD 2-star Maitland Toyota Open for women.

Both events will get underway on March 18 and will be shown to the world via webcast.

Surfest is a key event on the Hunter region's annual sporting calendar and attracts competitors from around the globe.

Minister for the Hunter Jodi McKay said the NSW Government through Events NSW is proud to support Surfest, Newcastle's world-renowned surfing festival.

"Newcastle is the ideal city for the event given its strong surfing culture," Ms McKay said.

"It is an opportunity to showcase Newcastle and the Hunter region to the world.

"It will provide a welcome boost to the region's economy during difficult times," she said.

With a population exceeding 500,000 people, Newcastle is New South Wales' second largest city and is situated a two hour drive or train ride north of Sydney.

Surfest chief Warren Smith said event organisers have been working "flat out" to secure partnerships to ensure the event would run the usual number of contests event supporters have come to expect over the past 24 years.

"The sponsorship from Events NSW and our long term local sponsors allows Surfest to stage nine surfing contests over 11 days," Mr Smith said.

"We are really pleased to once again present the increasingly popular Wine & Waves food and wine fair on the final weekend of Surfest 2009."

Wine and Waves is a key strategy in increasing the participation of both locals and visitors to the Hunter and provides the opportunity for them to sample the products of Hunter restaurateurs and vigneron.

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Events NSW CEO Geoff Parmenter said Surfest is an important regional event on the NSW Master Events Calendar generating economic benefits for the state and local community.

"NSW is the primary destination for international surf tourists and is the true home of surfing in Australia and the Asia Pacific. Surfest celebrates Australia's surfing culture and attracts competitors and visitors from across Australia and around the globe," Mr Parmenter said.

**For further information call:**

**Warren Smith on 0412127525**

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