



Riverina Regional Development Board

**Submission to
House of Representatives Standing Committee on
Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry**

Inquiry into Rural Skills Training and Research

Secretary: *Boalman*.....

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON
AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES
AND FORESTRY

Initiatives in Education, Employment and Training

The Board has demonstrated a strong commitment to this sectoral strategy over several years through various projects that it has successfully undertaken, namely:

1) Riverina Skills Survey and Business Audit 1999

This published report detailed the plight of the region at the time in terms of attracting skilled people to the region to fulfill the identified needs of business and industry in the Riverina

2) Western Riverina Higher Education Needs Analysis 2001

This published report prepared by The Centre for Rural Social Research, Charles Sturt University, researched the needs for the provision of tertiary education access in the Western Riverina.

The recommendations contained in the report led to the successful implementation of an integrated program in Business Management/Business Studies delivered by TAFE NSW-Riverina Institute and Charles Sturt University in 2004 and continued in 2005. The program is overseen and nurtured by a widely representative Community Reference Group as a sub-committee of the Riverina Regional Development Board.

3) Riverina Skilled Migration Project Officer (RSMPO)

The Board has embarked upon what is considered to be a National Pilot through the appointment of a project officer to address the Board's needs and responsibilities as a Gazetted Regional Certifying Body for the purposes of the Migration Act. The Board provides certifications and sponsorships for 3 skilled migration programs undertaken by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs.

This initial processing for skilled migration applications was until recently undertaken by the Board's Executive Officer but since February 2005, the RSMPO has taken over this function.

The activities of the Board as an RCB and therefore the work role of the RSMPO is to facilitate the smooth entry into the Riverina of appropriately skilled and trained migrants to fill identified skill needs across a variety of industries and professions.

4) Riverina Telecommunications Strategy-Simplenet

The Board devised a simple program of free-of-charge training in computer use for online applications for new and novice users across the Riverina.

A mobile computer-equipped van with suitably qualified trainers was mobilized across the Riverina for one whole month in 2001 when many people from the agricultural sector

in small communities had the opportunity to receive training in the use of email, internet connection, web searching, etc.

This project won a National Award from the Australia and New Zealand Regional Science Association International Inc (ANZRSIAI) in 2001 for Regional Development Best Practice.

Simplenet and other aspects of the Telecommunications Strategy have been accessible over the last three years to the general public at dedicated sites at the highly popular and very well attended Henty Field Days and Murrumbidgee Farm Fair.

These examples of the Board's commitment to the Employment Education and Training sectoral strategy of its strategic plan demonstrate a broad commitment to the needs of the rural communities across the Riverina.

5) Development of Strategic Education and Training Plan for Water Management

The Board is currently involved in coordinating a research project to determine industry needs in the region, and educational courses that are existing or may be developed, to provide training in water management in the Riverina.

The Region, particularly Western Riverina is highly water dependent and the irrigation areas abound with operators, managers and a wide range of personnel actively involved in water sourcing and delivery. This is considered essential and logical training for the sustainability of various industry sectors in the Riverina.

A brief is being developed for publication and request for submissions of expressions of interest from suitably qualified researchers to identify initially:-

- Industry needs
- Legislative responsibilities of organizations
- What courses currently exist and from where delivered
- Who needs courses in water management? Farmers, businesses, councils?
- Is there an employment base for these skilled people?
- Is there any existing research on the topic?
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Representations on related issues

1) Lifelong Learning-The Future of Public Education in NSW

The Board made a submission to the NSW Government in 2003 on proposed changes to public education in NSW. The Board's submission fully supported the position of the TAFE NSW-Riverina Institute's Council which was basically to retain the integrity and zone of operation of the then structure of Riverina Institute within the region.

The Board participated in various strategy meetings with strong community representation that culminated in a convincing and unified representation to the Board of Management of the Department of Education and Training on the issue. Suffice it to say that the representations made from the region were successful in overturning the original proposals that would have weakened the capabilities of Riverina Institute in this Region.

2) Inquiry into the Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture

In September 2003 the NSW Minister for Agriculture and Fisheries, the Hon. Ian Macdonald MLC, announced the closure of the Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture for the delivery of full and part-time residential courses.

The Board joined the widespread condemnation of this move and made a submission to the inquiry by the general Purpose Standing Committee No 5 of the Legislative Council.

The Board in its submission noted that it considered the closure 'an assault on the integrity of the Board's strategic mission for the Riverina.'

The submission also stated, *inter alia*, that 'Clearly the provision of education and training to new generation farmers in the region is a fundamental requirement in a rural environment where 'big picture''(farm) production is the norm.'

The above two examples serve to illustrate the inconsistency in application of government policy and processes that have the potential to fragment or disintegrate the level of service delivery from regional locations to people in those regions.

Riverinal communities survive on a delicate balance of services and facilities within their zones of interest and influence. Any reduction or fragmentation of service provision in the education and training sector consequentially diminishes the critical mass of small towns .

It is conceded that the above two examples are state related issues but they clearly demonstrate that an integrated government approach to education training and research must be considered. Those involved in policy making and implementation need to understand that the economic rationalization of services and centralization of delivery will spell the death of rural and regional Australia as we know it.

Agencies such as the Riverina Regional Development Board are committed to the growth and development of all industry and professional sectors and the attraction of new investment into the region.

While it may not fall within the terms of reference for the committee, a related issue for the sustainability of the agricultural sector in this region is the inability of various industry sectors to attract workers. The citrus industry in the Western Riverina is screaming continuously for fruit pickers. There is still no sustainable solution to this

problem and there are plenty of examples of crops simply not being harvested. There is plenty of evidence from the industry to support this claim and in particular from the Hon Tony Catanzariti, MLC, a member of the NSW Legislative Council and a citrus grower.

The various skilled migration programs are mostly unable to assist the growers to attract workers because they are not considered skilled. This is a contentious belief as fruit not expertly harvested is ruined.

Other industries, particularly in the food production engine room of the Western Riverina, are so desperate for general workers that one very significant chicken meat producer, Bartter Enterprises of Griffith, is trucking its meat from killed birds to Sydney for processing. This work would normally be done on site but a dearth of available workforce has rendered this impossible at the present time.

The committee is also to look at the impact of population drift and regional economic processes on the provision of education and research in the rural sector.

The above really is a chicken and egg scenario the solution to which must surely be a whole of government consideration at the Commonwealth level and cross Government strategy with the States to understand the ramifications of follow on effects of policy implementation in rural and regional areas.

While advanced technologies will no doubt benefit the agricultural sector now and into the future, the industry still needs workers so that any vocational training and education at all levels should consider the concurrent requirement for workers at the fundamental level. A bunch of technologically savvy farmers will not be much use if they cannot attract a workforce for on-farm and in-shed processing operations.

I trust the foregoing observations may be of assistance to the Inquiry.

Yours faithfully



Peter Dale
Executive Officer

8.6.05