



RIVERINA REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT BOARD,
RIVERINA AREA CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE AND RIVERINA REGIONAL
ORGANISATION OF COUNCILS

**JOINT SUBMISSION TO THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STANDING COMMITTEE
ON PRIMARY INDUSTRIES AND REGIONAL SERVICES**

INQUIRY INTO INFRASTRUCTURE AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF AUSTRALIA'S
REGIONAL AREAS

Background

Riverina Regional Development Board

The Riverina Regional Development Board (the Board) is one of eleven Regional Development Boards across country NSW, which were established in 1990. The Boards operate under the Minister for Regional Development, the Hon. Harry Woods, MP, and in conjunction with the Department of State and Regional Development, acts as an advisory body to the Government on regional development issues and initiatives and as a vehicle for implementing actions to further regional development.

The Riverina Area Consultative Committee (RACC)

A network of 58 ACCs exists across Australia on a regional basis. Their role is to enhance employment and training opportunities, and to promote regional industry development. ACCs also provide information to the Federal Government in relation to labour market issues and wider regional development issues.

The Riverina Regional Organisation of Councils (RIVROC)

RIVROC was established in 1994 as a regional consortium involving the Western Riverina councils of Murrumbidgee, Carrathool, Hay, Jerilderie, Leeton, Griffith and Narrandera. The mission of the organisation is to "improve the efficiency and effectiveness of member councils and to enhance regional, economic, social, environmental and community development and to increase access to resources for the region".

Introduction

The Riverina is one of the most productive regions in NSW, contributing in excess of \$4 billion to the State's economy. The region continues to experience strong growth through the creation of new developments and the expansion of existing business and industry. Contrary to other regional areas, unemployment levels are significantly lower than state or national figures and this places pressure upon employers who must frequently recruit staff from outside of the region (and state).

The Board, in conjunction with organisations such as the RACC, is working cooperatively on a range of strategies to address labour availability and skill shortages – particularly in the Western Riverina, one of the major horticultural and agricultural production areas in Australia.

The need to address labour shortages has been addressed to a degree by the formation of a taskforce established by the NSW Premier to develop short term and long term initiatives to expand the workforce of the Western Riverina. The key initiatives of the Premier's 'Five Point Plan' are based around: the release of Crown land for residential development (to combat the high cost of land and housing); analysis of industrial land availability and transport infrastructure; a business survey and skills audit to determine labour skills and training needs; the creation of an Internet site and the development of a labour attraction strategy; and strategies to ensure the increasing population of the area are adequately serviced with regards to human services.

A similar initiative, the 'Tumut Shire: Country Centres Growth Strategy' has also been developed for Tumut following the decision by Visy to establish a mill, which will result in some 500 to 600 direct new jobs over the next three to five years.

To support these activities, the RACC has sought funding through the Regional Assistance Program (administered by the Department of Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business) to undertake a project to attract labour to the region. This project will be undertaken in the Western Riverina and the Tumut area, jointly with key stakeholders in the region.

At a time when all economic indicators would suggest great potential and opportunity for the region, a number of factors which are outside the control of regional organisations such as ours, continue to impede this growth and development.

Issues

Like other regional and rural areas of Australia, the Riverina has experienced a decline in government and non-government services and substantial cutbacks in essential services such as health, banking and financial services. While government policies of de-regulation, centralisation and privatisation have generated competition, improved levels of service, cost savings and price-cutting for metropolitan markets and heavily populated centres, the reverse is true for regional and rural consumers.

On 29 January this year, the Board, through its Agricultural Working Group sub-committee, held a forum titled 'Maximising Rural Prosperity'. The forum brought together stakeholders from the Riverina region and beyond to identify, prioritise and plan in relation to impediments to agricultural development and the rural sector within the Riverina region. The information gained from this forum will feed into other initiatives of the Agricultural Working Group's 'Agricultural Strategy' and ultimately inform the Board's 'Regional Economic Development Strategy'. A copy of the outcomes document is attached to this submission as Appendix A.

The Board has also participated in a similar workshop run by the NSW Ministry of Urban Infrastructure Management (MUIM). This forum brought together stakeholders in the Murray Riverina region at a workshop held in Griffith on 15 February 1999 to discuss infrastructure issues and priorities. A copy of the infrastructure issues and priorities that arose from the workshop are attached as Appendix B.

The Board, in partnership with RIVROC and REROC (a regional consortium of eastern Riverina councils) has been pro-active in accessing funds to undertake a telecommunications strategy from the Federal Government's Networking the Nation (NTN) program under the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts. This strategy particularly, has highlighted the deficiencies which regional, rural and remote areas experience in telecommunications infrastructure and services. While the Board and other regional bodies have the opportunity to access additional assistance from this fund, it recognises the enormous imbalance that exists between regional and metropolitan centres.

Mobile telephony is poor to non-existent in many locations, where a communication mechanism is as much a safety issue as a crucial tool for business and industry. On line services such as the Internet present numerous opportunities for the business and community sector to gain information, education, training and access to global markets. However people are constrained by the limitations of existing infrastructure, frustrated by the slow, intermittent level of service the inequities in access costs and call charges.

While funds such as NTN go some way to dealing with many of the problems, and are greatly appreciated by regional communities, they are **not** the solution.

Health and medical services and facilities have been reduced or depleted in many rural areas as resources are focused in larger regional centres. People now have to travel further and further to receive treatment or diagnosis for complaints or conditions that were previously dealt with at their local hospital.

Communities with reduced medical facilities are finding it harder to attract doctors because they can no longer maintain skills or expertise in particular areas. Even attracting overseas-qualified doctors who have expressed an interest in working in rural locations to meet the shortage of doctors in areas of need is a bureaucratic minefield. Specialists are increasingly rare or non-existent so families suffer the additional burden of transport and accommodation to receive diagnosis, care and treatment.

Lack of medical facilities and services increasingly becomes the reason why families, initially considering relocating to regional areas to take up some of the many available positions, decide against the move.

Conclusion

Issues such as these are intensely frustrating for a region that has a multitude of lifestyle and job opportunities. The Riverina region has the potential to generate increased levels of production for raw and value added food and fibre products. Current investment in new and existing developments has created significant numbers of additional jobs. However this will only occur if the Riverina is able to maintain and build upon key infrastructure to support industry and the community and attract additional labour to the region.