

Committee Secretary
Standing Committee On Primary Industries and Regional Services
House of Representatives
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

INQUIRY SUBMISSION

1. INTRODUCTION

This Inquiry provides an important opportunity for the Parliament to focus on the barriers to regional development and the factors that would assist development and employment in regional areas.

Many regional areas are facing dramatic decline in enterprise expansion and job growth opportunities due to a lack of government attention to the importance of publicly funded baseline data as a fundamental infrastructure requirement, as would be expected in the provision of roads, bridges and other public services.

It is the experience of my Company that a major barrier to regional development is the lack of baseline or foundation biophysical data, information and knowledge for regional communities to properly assess their development opportunities and constraints. In many cases regional communities are attempting to use very unreliable and incomplete government data sets in decision making without appreciating the inadequacy of these data.

When this situation is pointed out to regional communities it is difficult for them to understand why in this age of modern environmental information technology that these public data lack adequate coverage in rural areas and are not readily accessible. The primary reason is that both Commonwealth and State agencies have instituted major barriers through controls on data collection, data cost, data access and use. These data include biophysical, economic and social data sets.

Most Commonwealth government agencies involved in baseline data management (eg. AGSO; ABS; DAFF, DHT, MDBC, etc.) have little focus on regional development requirements or the need to use the data in infrastructure assessments. There is little data integration or coordination of these agencies/ departments in data collection, processing or distribution. It is often assumed by these agencies that provision of spatial data layers on their websites will empower regional communities with the information they need for decision support. However, there is little evidence to suggest that this approach works in the favour of regional communities.

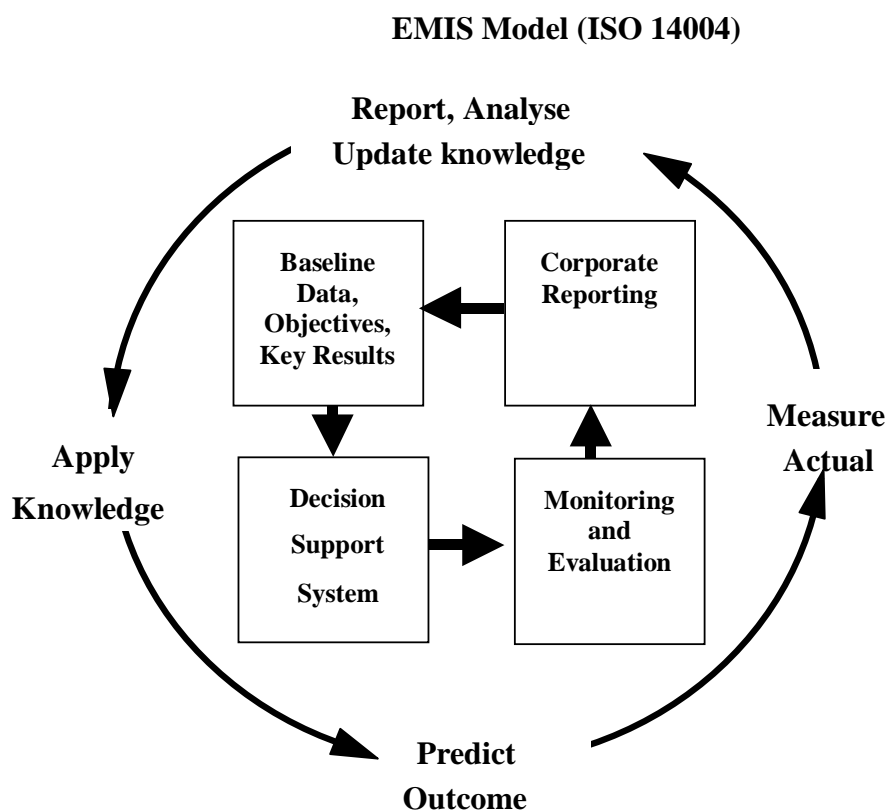
The assessment of the information requirements for regional communities is a very utilitarian process that eventually involves deriving the relevant information that answers

specific economic, social and environmental questions. Standard data layers provided by government agencies fall far short of this requirement. In most cases, specialist information brokers require access to the fundamental (raw) data that has to be processed to produce the required information and knowledge.

There is a need for this Inquiry to address the data availability and access barriers imposed by Commonwealth and State agencies to specialist information brokers. This should result in recommendations for changes in Commonwealth policy relating to the management of publicly funded biophysical, economic and social data that are critical in supporting regional enterprise and infrastructure development purposes.

2. BACKGROUND

There is often a public perception that certain infrastructure must be provided to support current land use requirements in the absence of proper appreciation of the potential regional development opportunities and constraints. It is often assumed that current government data sets for the biophysical, economic and social data layers are readily available or used in the decision process for infrastructure development. The opportunities and constraints of regional development can only be properly addressed with comprehensive and reliable regional baseline datasets. This process is fundamental to decision support and ultimately in monitoring the success or otherwise of enterprise and infrastructure development. The following model (ISO14004) describes this simple process:



It is unfortunate that this simple model is not part of Commonwealth or State planning frameworks for regional development and major infrastructure design proposals.

The Victorian Government is partly addressing this wider issue of data availability and access in a professional and adequate manner by releasing public data at little cost and with few restrictions on data use, and engaging private companies to deliver the data value-adding services. It can now be expected that Victoria will be able to significantly address regional development initiatives (eg. site selection for plantations and vineyards) and attract investment funding for infrastructure support well ahead of other States.

The consequence of this situation in other States is that regional communities and industries do not have a proper basis for developing regional development plans or providing a development context for the implementation of economically/ ecologically sustainable development (ESD).

While it could be expected that the current Inquiry by the Productivity Commission into ESD should properly address this issue, the draft report, while acknowledging the importance of this barrier, has failed to produce recommendations for changes in Commonwealth policies that would overcome these barriers.

3. BARRIERS TO DATA AVAILABILITY AND ACCESS

Detailed below are examples of how these data and information barriers emerge at a Commonwealth level (and within States):

- The planning frameworks of the Commonwealth's environmental, industry and resource development agencies do not have a regional development focus. In most cases there is no regional industry development context to implement ESD or plan for infrastructure. Also, the Regional Development Organisations (RDO) have inadequate funds to sponsor the acquisition and integration of regional layers of biophysical, economic and social data for resource assessment or enterprise site selection purposes;
- The Commonwealth and State agencies have highjacked the funding available for regional resource mapping and assessment (eg. MDBC and National Land and Water Audit), clearly in breach of the National Competition Policy. Also, government technology and methodology in the area of resource assessment is generally inferior that available in private industry where information brokerage services are significantly more effective and efficient due to their close operation within regional development industries;
- Government departments and agencies have access to public data, information, technology and funds for regional resource mapping and assessment purposes that are denied to private industry. This form of unfair trading ultimately impacts on the capability of private companies to add value into regional communities through information services and decision support (ie. public data have no value until it adds value in economic, social and environmental decisions). Also, this impact on industry further stifles the capacity of regional producers and service providers to be innovative and achieve employment growth through enterprise development and export;
- Where Commonwealth agencies have spatial data that may be useful in providing context to regional development assessments these data are not readily available as raw, unprocessed data to the specialist information brokerage industry for processing or value-adding.

- The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) provides economic and social data at a high price and not in a useable spatial format for use in geographic information systems (GIS) where it can be used with biophysical data for resource analysis at regional scales;
- The Australian Geological Survey Organisation (AGSO) provides geophysical data at a high price and restricts usage through licence arrangements. These data are essential for deriving soil property maps that are fundamental for resource assessments. Also, the coverage of geophysical data in major economic and coastal zones of NSW, Qld and WA and most rural areas of Australia (except Vic) are inadequate;
- The allocation of Telstra Funds are not structured to address regional development issues, and therefore the achievement of comprehensive regional baseline data sets, regional development plans and the implementation of ESD at regional scales; and

The Inquiry could address these issues through recommendations that support:

- Commonwealth adoption of the ISO14004 model as a basis for resource development planning and implementation of ESD;
- Commonwealth significantly improve funding for adoption and maintenance of regional development plans;
- Open access to the public's economic, social and biophysical data sources at little or no cost to the resource development industries and specialist information brokerage companies;
- Control of Commonwealth agencies and department against bidding for resource mapping and assessment work that can be undertaken by private industry. This control would apply principally to CSIRO, BRS, and AGSO. The funding support agencies of the MDBC, NLWA and LWRDC should develop practices of applying the National Competition Policy. Overall, all Commonwealth agencies and department should be required to apply the requirements of the National Competition Policy. This would avoid competition with private industry where there is the greatest capacity for jobs growth and capacity to add value to regional communities. In this respect, it is better for Commonwealth funding to be directed to regional development organisations (RDO) than to government agencies that are adept in circulating the funds among themselves;
- The ABS to provide regional economic and social data in a more useable spatial (GIS) format for specialist information brokerage companies to integrate with regional biophysical data layers; and
- The AGSO to significantly improve the coverage of geophysical data coverage over the key regional areas or economic zones of Australia to improve the foundation biophysical data required for regional resource assessment.

Yours sincerely,

Rob Gouraly
Managing Director