

Regional Australia – 2025 and Beyond

A Call for Strategic Directions

Outcomes from Consultation with Graduates of the Australian Rural Leadership Program

“Communities and firms without competitive advantage will not prosper—they lapse into decline or subsistence; Nations, communities, and firms that prosper constantly invest in creating new competitive advantage rather than protecting old advantage. Risk-taking entrepreneurs are one of the keys to the continual seeking; Economic improvement and growth alone are not enough to sustain communities. They are necessary, but not sufficient. Communities that survive and prosper also invest in building the social and human capital of their institutions and people. But communities with high social and human capital and declining economic opportunity are not likely to have positive futures.” *Karl N. Stauber. (Why Invest in Rural America – and How? A Critical Public Policy Question for the 21st Century)*

Many articles, current and previous government policies and published documents have been sourced in the development of this paper, but **the views expressed in this discussion paper are those of Australian Rural Leadership Program graduates** who participated in this project.

What is needed right now

The people who live in regional Australia are hardworking and eager to see their communities and industries thrive. They are looking not for handouts, but for investment in the future. They seek an understanding of their challenges and sensible support to leverage opportunities and create a sustainable future for their communities, their families and their businesses.

1. Recognition of the Challenges

Regional Australia is facing significant challenges including:

- Engaging with foreign investment
- Dying communities and withdrawal of government services
- Control of agriculture by superannuation companies
- Sea changers, tree changers – influx of new populations challenging the old order
- Refugee integration
- Overregulation of agriculture
- Cutbacks in R&D funding
- Poor internet and mobile phone services
- Drought and associated mental health impacts
- Tension between farmers and environmentalists
- Poor access to health care
- Limited post-secondary education options
- Impacts of free trade agreements
- Use of high quality agricultural land for non-agricultural purposes
- The impact of mining rights
- Animal husbandry practices

- Ageing demographic
- Need for a greater role for women

2. Valuing Regional Australia

There is a pressing need for the broader Australian community to be involved in valuing the contribution of rural Australia to:

- Feeding the nation
- GDP and the nation's economy
- The development of new food sources/supply chain
- Preservation, protection and restoration of precious environment
- Providing alternative living spaces to overcrowded urban areas
- Acknowledgement and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the majority of whom live in or identify with "country" in regional Australia
- National history and cultural identity

3. Articulated Regional Strategies

There are no articulated strategies for regional Australia as a whole. The current direction and goals of all spheres of government are not clear; rather we are dealing with the result of decades of incremental change at a time when fundamental shifts are required. What is needed right are new, nationally agreed strategic directions for regional, rural and remote Australia that are:

- The outcome of contemporary, thoughtful and informed public debate,
- Not "one size fits all", rather that respond to the diversity of regional Australia
- Not sectorally based – rather focussed on bringing industry, business and community together in regions
- Based on a long term vision
- Moving from planning to action

Graduates suggest that the ARLF could advocate for an overarching rural policy/strategy for Australia to aid rural development and provide leadership to bring together stakeholders to collaborate with each other and governments.

Goals for a national strategy

This consultation has developed the following goals as the focus for a new national strategy for regional, rural and remote Australia:

- Economic prosperity
- Quality access to essential community services
- Sustainable environment
- Confident, inclusive and vibrant communities

Issues to be addressed in a national strategy

Economic prosperity

Farming is a business, requiring/managing inputs to produce outputs. Like any business, long term sustainability comes from understanding and measuring those inputs, caring for country and community while continually identifying efficiency gains and crunching the numbers regularly to ensure profits are obtained. (Consultation participant)

1. SUSTAINABILITY OF FARMING AND THE SECURITY OF FOOD PRODUCTION INCLUDING:

- Animal husbandry practices, e.g. mulesing and live cattle exports
- Enlisting the commitment of communities to continue production
- Facilitating more collaboration between sectors and across communities with all sectors
- Overarching rights such as mining rights on agricultural land and managing co-existence
- Land use planning and in particular, the protection of high quality agricultural land for agricultural production.
- Management of Foreign Investment in rural land
- The impacts of free trade agreements
- The need for new investment opportunities in the innovative food and agriculture sector
- New programs for farmers finding structural adjustments necessary to establish new industries in their regions
- Ensure the delivery of ongoing skill development and training for agriculture
- Ensure the food processing sector has appropriate transport, communications and infrastructure to facilitate its competitiveness in local, national and international markets
- New ways of doing agriculture that integrate the environment
- New raw materials for new industries
- The need for facilitated discussions between Native Title holders and communities to overcome the fear of Indigenous Land Use Agreements in order to capitalise on the opportunity for shared use, environmental conservation and protection and potential economic development

2. COMPETITIVENESS AND POSITIONING FOR REGIONS INCLUDING:

- The digital age – preparing agriculture and fisheries to take advantage of the opportunities that the digital age offers rather than being disrupted by them
- International trade – taking advantage of the recent (and pending) Free Trade Agreements whilst at the same time maintaining Australia's competitive advantages, particularly its reputation for clean, green, safe products
- High cost of Production resulting in non-competitiveness – Australia is progressing down a path of over regulation, imposing increasing costs onto business
- Access to Production Tools – Australia loses competitive advantage through our inability to access certain production tools, available in other countries. Tools such as vaccines, HGP's, Beta Agonists, antibiotics
- Appropriate investment - in particular for R&D in broad fields such as finance, commerce and trade (as well as emotional wellbeing of individuals and communities)

- The next generation need to be attracted to the rural sector and technology will play a big part. High-speed Internet access is essential to generating more rural entrepreneurs
 - Support for the development of tourism for regional communities. Tourism in regional Australia employs more people than mining, agriculture fishing and forestry combined. For every \$1 spent there is another 98c generated and 44% of the income from tourism in Australia is generated in the regions for 23% of the population. It is an industry capable of providing even more jobs in regions.
 - Regional Development Australia regions are in a key position to advocate and provide strategic leadership. These organisations need to be supported, and closer ties forged with Local Government so that together they can build new regional partnerships. Partnerships across levels of government need to be redefined
 - Public funds should be used to build infrastructure and create institutions that foster networking and synergies among local entrepreneurs and local public servants
 - Building the skills of local leaders (including entrepreneurship) will be the key to stronger economies in regions
3. GROWING SMALL BUSINESSES INCLUDING
- Small businesses are the backbone of rural communities but are under threat
 - Rural communities need improved access to business advice and some form of regional development boards/services continue to be needed
 - There is a need for incubator facilities in rural areas, particularly to encourage younger people to establish small businesses and start-ups
 - It is critical that reforms be instituted to reduce cross-border anomalies to facilitate business development across state boundaries
 - Establish and promote small grant schemes for innovative local businesses who need to raise capital
 - Support the creation and expansion of Indigenous businesses
4. DEVELOPING FUNCTIONING TRANSPORTATION SYSTEMS INCLUDING
- Properly functioning, affordable transport services are vital to the economy of regional Australia, as is reliable access to ports and distribution centres
 - Communities cannot function without being connected across their regions and beyond, to larger regional centres and to capital cities
 - Rural and remote communities are dependent upon services delivered by incoming providers who need fast and reliable transport options
 - *Air:* Freight is a major issue with the signing of new trade agreements. There is a need for a wide network of regional freight and passenger air services across the nation through the provision of subsidies where necessary
 - *Road:* Infrastructure is the single biggest issue facing rural and regional Australia. Investment in road and bridge infrastructure, will ensure rural communities and businesses survive and thrive
 - *Rail:* Placement of intermodal hubs where freight can be exchanged between road and rail.
 - *Sea:* Properly functioning transport services at a reasonable cost are vital to the economy of regions and access to ports and distribution centres must be ensured

Quality access to essential community services

There is a high degree of variability in the characteristics of rural and remote communities, both within and between the States and the Northern Territory and families living in rural and remote Australia have specific needs which are the direct result of living in particular geographic locations. There is no “one size fits all” solution. (Consultation participant)

1. PROVIDING EFFECTIVE EDUCATION OPTIONS INCLUDING
 - Addressing the gap between disadvantaged students in rural areas and those in better-off communities in the cities
 - Ensuring all primary school children have exceptional attendance records to build their fundamental skills
 - Working on improving retention rates for students transitioning between grades 10 and 11
 - Providing affordable access to all those who want to attend university while supporting those who want to take an alternative pathway such as vocational education and skills training
 - Developing regional plans for the provision of vocational education services
 - Supporting local education services so that an area can produce its own workforce
 - Planning to achieve, by age 18, each young person residing in rural or remote Australia to receive the education required to develop their full potential in the social, economic, political and cultural life of the nation
 - Recognising that access in regional areas will be more expensive and legislating to bring rural education funding up to a national standard
 - Ensuring students’ access to technology, support services, range and choice of subjects, the cultural appropriateness of the curriculum, the quality of the teachers and their continuity
 - The needs of rural and remote students should be met through local commitment and ownership as well as through government funded initiatives
 - Providing quality education in rural and remote Australia through creative and flexible approaches that utilise leadership capacity at all levels, innovative technology and methodology, and whole-of-government approaches
 - Providing incentives to encourage the establishment and development of university campuses in rural areas
 - Reconsidering concessions, allowances and loans to encourage young people to continue their education
 - Tailoring education pathways to reflect the skill needs of regional areas
 - Facilitating continuous professional development pathways for people in regional areas
 - Providing of arts education that is affordable, accessible, and of high quality is essential at primary, secondary and tertiary levels.

2. MEETING THE HEALTH NEEDS OF REGIONAL AUSTRALIANS INCLUDING
 - Providing needs-based flexible funding arrangements to ensure that people in rural, regional and remote Australia will be as healthy as other Australians and have the capacity to maintain healthy communities
 - Targeting vulnerable regional demographics with tailored services

- Regional communities need local providers understanding local needs and allowing residents to stay in their communities
- Recognising that social capital must be maintained – when a hospital is taken out of a small centre it has a greater impact than just access to health services. It removes jobs that bring people with professional backgrounds to the area, and the ensuing ripple effect challenges the robustness of communities
- There is an urgent need for accurate and accessible data specific to location to allow for the analysis of health-related investment and the identification of effective programs that should be enhanced
- The quality and scope of data for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities should be improved and data collection carried out in a sensitive and culturally respectful way
- Alcohol, ice and other illicit substance abuse and threats to personal safety are a significant concern for rural and regional Australians, yet access to corresponding services is less outside the metropolitan area. Rural and regional Australians are not accessing community or acute alcohol and drug services at the rate of metropolitan Australians
- There are particular vulnerabilities of older people living in rural and remote communities. These include higher costs of living, a higher proportion with low incomes, greater isolation, and greater exposure to adverse weather events (e.g. heat-waves, fires and floods)
- There is a chronic shortage of flexible respite arrangements
- Severe shortage of professional staff in disability, aged and health care sectors
- There is a need to ensure that planning for primary care services is undertaken in local communities by local organisations/agencies
- There is a critical need for improved health outcomes for Indigenous populations
- To get better health outcomes in rural Australia will require new models of care and new paradigms
- As a 2013 Grattan Institute report suggested, addressing general practitioner shortages in remote Australia needs to involve broader roles for existing professionals – such as allowing pharmacists to undertake immunisations – and to consider new professions
- Access to services through the NBN needs to be comprehensively addressed
- Much greater investment needs to be made in community care in particular as an alternative to clinical care, so that people who suffer from a mental illness are able to choose the method of care that best suits their needs. The very limited availability of supported accommodation is one of the most significant gaps in the current community care arrangements
- There is a need to develop a sustainable model of delivery of specialist health services
- Allied health workers are the key to better health in rural areas and more positions need to be created
- Ensure an expanded scope of practice for dental health therapists and hygienists and allow right to independent practice in order to fill the gap in available dental services in rural areas
- Initiate a program to focus on the issues affecting the health of children

living in rural Australia through a focus on the key social determinants such as poverty, access to education and health services to develop a strategy for early intervention

- Review the funding formula so that communities can provide effective aged care options to enable people to age within their communities
- Ensure the introduction of the NDIS is advantageous to people with a disability living in regional Australia

3. COMMUNICATIONS INCLUDING

- Excellent communications systems are central to improved prosperity and profitable businesses, access to health and education services, the development of regional entrepreneurs and the retention and engagement of young people in communities
- It is essential to provide mobile phone coverage, high-speed broadband and functioning postal services to all families, services, businesses and communities in rural, regional and remote Australia at a level equivalent to metropolitan areas
- Fully implement the current fibre-to-the-home NBN plan. Fibre optic cable supplemented with wireless and satellite technology can bring a world standard communication infrastructure to regional areas
- Implement a joint project with mobile service providers to map the black spots in regional areas
- Develop a pathway to support communities and businesses not receiving fibre optic coverage currently, to enable a single community or groups of communities to develop and present a financial case for their inclusion within NBN
- Create a dedicated fund to co-invest in mobile carrier services for mobile phone black spots
- Coordinate and share infrastructure between the NBN and mobile phone networks

4. LOCAL TRANSPORT INCLUDING

- There is a great need for dependable local public transport in regional Australia. Elderly people, underage travellers and people with a disability all face restricted mobility because there are not sufficient public transport services to help them get around. Many people are forced out of regional areas because of a lack of transport services
- Young people are seeking public transport options to give them entertainment options and to access employment opportunities so that they can continue to live at home
- Many services are now being regionalised such as hospitals, vocational education centres etc. and people need transport options to main towns to access these
- Transport services are a major factor behind a thriving community and one that is struggling

5. CHILD CARE AND FAMILY SERVICES

- Child care is a significant issue in regional Australia and solutions will need an innovative approach

- Early childhood education and care models such as Family Day Care, Mobile Day Care and Nanny support will be required for regional communities with smaller or fluctuating childcare needs
- Shared infrastructure or colocation models should be considered to utilise existing education, community or unused buildings to provide fit-for-purpose childcare

Sustainable environments

1. ADAPTING TO CLIMATE CHANGE INCLUDING:

- Finding the political will to recognise climate change and address the issues
- Supporting (where necessary) farmers to adapt to change
- Managing the Great Barrier Reef while still keeping a focus on other important environmental issues is critical and needs strong government policy
- Supporting ecosystem based adaptation options to address climate change
- Carbon sequestration and rehydration of landscapes can go hand-in-hand to meet Climate Change responsibilities and improve the productivity and resilience of rural landscapes

2. HEALTHY RIVERS AND WATER INCLUDING

- Healthy Rivers and Estuaries is a very important topic to the seafood industry as a lot of the breeding areas for seafood and the fish's food comes from estuaries. Land runoff particularly from urban areas has a devastating effect
- Access, quality, quantity of water for agriculture, communities and the environment, innovative sharing of the resource
- Indigenous rights to culture and land/water, aside from what has already been decided with regard to native title - their rights need to be respected.

3. DROUGHT AND NATURAL DISASTER MANAGEMENT INCLUDING

- The expectation that farmers will manage the 55% (approx.) of Australia's land with little to no support during horrific droughts.

4. RELATIONSHIPS AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT INCLUDING

- Unfortunately farmers and conservation groups are often at loggerheads. Bringing all stakeholders together to discuss environmental issues is key while recognising some have less power (wealth resources) than others and need support to be at the table. Governments could put more store in regional Ministerial Advisory forums limit the impact of lobbying the Minister outside of the forums.
- If science, conservation groups and agriculture could get together and form positions on environmental issues it would be extremely powerful
- Some conservation groups are extremely good at strategic lobbying and activism. The farming and other rural sectors can learn from this
- Regional Development Australia committees can play a key role in bringing together stakeholders to discuss issues PRIOR to (and during) government consultation. The independence of RDAs can enable an independent position to be taken to government rather than waiting passively to be consulted
- Women and Indigenous people need to be actively included in environmental policy development

5. ENERGY GENERATION

- A decentralised approach to energy generation could bring resources and decision making into points of greatest impact and can reduce leakage of \$, resources and intellect
- Regional centres are well placed to generate their own renewable energy and export via existing infrastructure to the cities. By taking an integrated approach, carbon – both from production and waste – can be locally processed to release energy, recycle nutrients and reduce costs

Confident and vibrant communities

It seems to me that the key responses needed to the priorities listed below are investment and education – human, financial, intellectual, political, infrastructure – and that the element that needs addressing is ‘agency’ (as in capacity/authority to act). Many regions and communities say they are powerless to develop or deliver initiatives that suit their own circumstances – despite the plethora of State and Commonwealth programs and policies designed to support this. Why? (consultation participant)

1. BUILDING VIBRANT COMMUNITIES INCLUDING

- What is needed to create vibrant communities? Community leadership as well as community connection. Inclusivity rather than elitism. Active encouragement of youth to stay in the town which hinges on employment and educational facilities.
- Maintaining resilience in the face of adversity and support for communities to prosper in difficult times
- A healthy cultural life is a significant factor in attracting people to live and work in regional areas, and arts and cultural programs need ongoing support
- In order to create vibrant communities, this responsibility rests with the people who live in them. In order to be successful however there does need to exist a unifying purpose/reason/economy that can evolve with the times

2. LEADERSHIP INCLUDING

- There is a pressing need for leadership in regional communities by trusted and influential people
- Young people need to be given the opportunity to develop leadership skills and the forum to use these skills, rather than being forced to wait for older people to leave before they can affect directions
- Shared leadership between Indigenous and non-indigenous people in areas of conflict could make all the difference

3. COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND CULTURAL IDENTITY INCLUDING

- Regional people have a deep attachment to their place, the natural environment and their communities that finds expression in cultural activities both sporting and artistic. Hundreds of regional, rural, remote and very remote communities have established an identity and landscape as distinctive and as ‘Australian’ as the country itself
- Many communities have a strong sense of their identity and the dynamics have historically created supportive places to live. Recent changes including tree and sea changers moving in, the arrival of refugees and a relocation of government housing tenants to cheaper rural areas have created new challenges that need some facilitated support

- Communities have a fair idea of what is needed to retain facilities and viability. Government funding is accessed by jumping through hoops and over hurdles to meet government criteria. A concept of government brokering could look at regional initiatives and retro fit them to the funding, rather than the reverse. Change predominantly needs to be community driven, with appropriate/timely support from Government/agencies/business. For this to be a reality, community needs to have sufficient skills from within to drive the changes they need. This requires building capacity and improving lines of communication
- Government/agencies/business need to address volunteer 'burn out' and give the community a respectful place at the decision making table rather than formula based consultations where communities feel they are not influencing the outcomes
- Acknowledgement, training and support for volunteers.
- Integration programs for refugees
- Cultural tourism based on local and regional identity can make a significant contribution to the regional and local economy
- Communities are 'resource poor' – individuals and families have insufficient money, services, and facilities to overcome the tyranny of distance and the tide of economic and community decline. The long tradition of regional communities sustaining themselves is under threat as drought, fire, flood, youth migration, and the removal of services take their toll

4. FUTURE OF SMALL TOWNS INCLUDING

- With the declining population in some rural and remote areas it seems that some small towns will disappear. For those who live there this is difficult. It's an economic reality but governments need to be (and often are) relatively sensitive about handling this. Government decisions to pull funding from dying towns cannot purely be numbers based and some towns will need to continue for particular economic, environmental or cultural reasons.
- The reality may be for many small towns that the best they can hope for is provision of/ access to (on-line, in person, local or regional) opportunities, resources and services for all (but not necessarily within their small/dying community). There is a desperate need for an over-arching plan to deal with this and bespoke support to enable communities to diversify and thrive where possible
- There is research supporting the premise that smaller communities are happier places to live and many people choose to live in small rural communities for the lifestyle, community connection and beauty. But if there doesn't exist a 'unifying purpose/reason/economy' for the future of a small community, then the growth of a vibrant regional centre should be supported. While some towns will disappear, other small towns will survive and some thrive
- The priorities of smaller communities will only be reflected in these larger regional centres if small communities and regional centres engage in future-planning in a manner that encompasses value for all
- Creating regional hubs may assist with all of the identified issues, in particular helping communities work together and in reducing the 'strain' of supporting effectively non-functioning communities. Regional centres could be very effective in enabling competitiveness and would offer much in terms

of pooled resources, marketing, tourism, specialisation, transport, distribution, health/hospitals, and local government/governance etc.

- However, the notion of *creating* regional hubs is troublesome unless there are clearly identifiable and logical places to invest and where people want that investment made as there is a risk of artificially creating hubs that are doomed to failure over time
- Accountability for change rests with both the people from small communities and those in the regional centres that support them. This would require support to determine a very clear view of what the ultimate objectives might be and then determining the things that need to be done in order to achieve them

5. LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND REGIONAL BODIES INCLUDING

- Local Government, Regional Development Australia committees and other regional bodies are critical to ensuring that rural, regional and remote Australians have a voice in State and national planning
- It is essential for Local Government to respond to significant issues in their area over and above their core business but they are often required to do this without additional support or resources which reduces their effectiveness
- Accountability for all levels of Government is a current concern and local government needs to be more transparent
- Local Government needs to display a greater willingness to work with community on projects and provide more opportunities for community to collaborate with council around decision-making.