

Regional Australia - 2025 and beyond A New Way of Doing Business

Background to this paper

Over recent months graduates of Australian Rural Leadership Foundation (*Foundation*) programs have engaged in an alumni-consultation process to canvass and articulate perspectives on the priority issues facing regional, rural and remote Australia. This process was designed to identify urgent and pressing issues that need attention from communities, industry, corporations and governments. Rather than prescribing detailed actions, the process has identified strategic directions that people can focus on collaboratively to secure a vibrant future for regional Australia. This consultation resulted in a preliminary document “**A Call for National Strategic Directions**”.

The Foundation hosted a Rural Issues Forum in Canberra in August 2015 to elicit input from a range of people engaged in regional policy. Following this forum, a final working paper was drafted: “**Regional Australia 2025 and Beyond – A New Way of Doing Business**”.

This paper reflects the input of the 1,000-strong alumni of the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation and is a summary of their views. It contains no list of required actions – that shopping list has been developed many times in the past, and encompasses many valid initiatives.

Rather, the aim of this project is to catalyse a new focus for all three spheres of government, community organisations and rurally dependent corporations, and provide the basis for discussion and negotiation between rural leaders and public institutions over the coming critical period. It presents a different way of reaching solutions that are regionally applicable, developed from within that region and therefore tailor made and community owned and led.

It is not intended to frame regions as in competition with cities. Indeed, many regional and metropolitan issues are shared. The absence of an overall regional Australia strategy and the opportunities this could unlock has been the focus of this consultation.

Regional Australia – 2025 and Beyond

A New Way of Doing Business

Outcomes from Consultation with Regional Policy identities and Foundation graduates

Introduction

Regional communities are strong and resilient and can make the decisions necessary to ensure a viable and vibrant future as part of an interconnected nation. A vibrant Australia needs urban and regional areas to work together to create a successful future for everyone.

The people who live in rural, regional and remote Australia – Indigenous and non-indigenous people – have the courage, determination, skills, leadership and intelligence to envision and implement a positive future. They are hardworking and committed and not looking for handouts, but for an investment in our collective future. They seek an understanding of their challenges, and practical support to create a sustainable future for their communities, the environment that they care for, their businesses and their families. They are strongly attached to their “country” and “place” and will, over time, continue the long tradition of their ancestors and predecessors in caring for the land, the people and history of the places they live.

It is in the nation’s interest to maintain strong regions and regional communities that contribute the following:

- Feeding the nation
- Greatly contributing to GDP and the national economy
- Preserving and protecting the land, environment and ecosystems in remote, regional and rural places
- Providing alternative spaces for people to live, relieving stress on urban areas
- Providing caring communities for the settlement of new arrivals
- Contributing to our national narrative and cultural identity

There are, however, many difficulties and challenges currently faced by communities in rural, remote and regional Australia and these will not be quickly or easily fixed – they need sustained action over time. The challenges are not new – in fact they are known in detail by decision makers, so reiterating the list of areas that need attention is unlikely to create new action or offer new solutions.

Addressing the challenges will need the combined commitment of the communities themselves, all spheres of government, the businesses and service providers that have a stake in effective regions.

AND – it will require all involved to consider new ways to set directions, take action and enable what needs to be achieved.

Regions are the basic unit of non-metropolitan Australia, and new directions require a new emphasis on building the capacity of regions to direct their own future.

A ‘new way’ means finding a new way of doing business within, with and for regional Australia.

Placing Regions at the Heart of the Planning

There is a long (and ever-growing) list of outstanding issues that need to be addressed for regions (see related paper – “A call for Strategic Directions”). However, each region has a different set of priorities that will need to be determined locally, and will only be effective now if those priorities are approached in a new way.

There are 4 areas for both immediate and long term attention that are the key to a positive future:

- 1. Economic prosperity**
- 2. Quality access to essential services**
- 3. Sustainable environments**
- 4. Confident, inclusive and vibrant communities**

Each region must decide together what the priorities are.

This approach requires a new commitment to regional decision-making – a new emphasis on the region as the “place” base for decision-making and a new commitment from all stakeholders to engage, communicate and collaborate in different ways.

Regional communities are asked to look at the opportunities to:

- Engage the whole community in setting a long term vision for the region and establishing priorities for action
- Build a community-wide planning process based on dialogue, understanding different perspectives and purposeful communication
- Use the wide range of new communication platforms to engage with the whole community
- Build relationships between Indigenous and non-indigenous communities based on mutual respect, and an understanding of what each has to contribute to the region
- Welcome new immigrants who have a strong desire to live in a safe place
- Anoint a diverse range of champions to advocate on behalf of and within the region
- Develop a “community value chain” to break down silos and allow for all sections of the community and businesses to be recognised as part of the value chain
- Reimagine the identity of communities and regions and create a local and regional story that everybody can belong to
- Create a regional plan developed by the people in the region, with outside assistance and facilitators to help develop a new narrative for 20, 30, 50 years, long-term and articulate the interdependency of businesses, communities and governments
- Build on effective decision making that exists within regions and local communities to affirm current processes, while supporting new methods for opening up the discussion to people not currently engaged
- Support and grow leadership in communities, encouraging the participation of a broader range of people in leadership initiatives
- Develop processes for capacity-building in communities and regions to leverage from current and possible future strengths
- Celebrate regional successes to bring people together and share learning and ideas

- Where there are powerless people in the community and region, find a way to bring their voices forwards
- Develop a culture of storytelling that affirms different voices and promotes the identity and character of the region
- Build the strength of regional centres to provide high quality services to the whole region

Communities working together are a powerful voice. We need to rethink how we see ourselves and understand who we are and what value we create for the nation – writing a new story about regions that is authored by the communities themselves

Each region needs its own plan and its own identity, developed by the people in the region – a true place-based plan. The plan needs to be long term and articulate the community value chain; identifying the interaction and interdependency of businesses, governments and communities in building a positive future for the region with:

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

The 3 spheres of government (federal, state and local) are asked to:

- Foster autonomy for communities to find regional/local solutions and regional/local opportunities, by
 - Providing greater support to recognised regional planning bodies (currently Regional Development Australia committees) to broaden their reach and engagement in communities
 - Challenging communities to identify their needs and priorities
 - Identifying and publishing examples of what is working well and why
 - Providing external facilitators to help regions see beyond themselves and plan boldly into the future – say 20, 30, 50 years
- Commit to a process to develop long-term consistent policies across the spheres:
 - Not constrained by budget or election cycles
 - Focused on 10-30 year outcomes
 - Accepting that political recognition for potentially good outcomes may not come until long after individual politicians/governments are out of office
 - Consistent with and developed in consultation across sectors and jurisdictions
- Develop an overarching planned and consistent approach to the development of infrastructure of all types including;
 - Energy
 - Transport/ distribution
 - Land
 - Communication/ IT
 - Schools
 - Medical

- Enable new ways of investment (e.g. community cooperatives, foreign joint ventures) leading to increased investment in:
 - Research & Development
 - Employment
 - Health
 - Education
 - Infrastructure
 - People
 - Mitigation and adaption to climate change
 - Restoring sustainable environments
 - New/developing sectors – especially as ‘traditional’ sectors transform or become unviable

- Provide incentives for permanent migration of migrants and refugees to rural/regional locations
 - Enabling, supporting and encouraging families, not just individuals
 - Including incentives for densely populated areas to move to rural/remote regions
 - Making it easier to recognise relevant qualifications, especially niche, highly skilled and professional
 - Supporting communities to ensure appropriate awareness and welcoming structures are in place
 - Working with communities to ensure there are appropriate job opportunities, education and health services as well as culturally sensitive frameworks in place

- Provide support for the whole value chain by
 - Acknowledging regions as “whole units” and ceasing practices that separate people from each other
 - Aligning policies and strategic directions between the spheres of government to support a cohesive approach to each region
 - Not identifying regions through their economic base. ‘Agriculture/farming’ are not pseudonyms for ‘rural and regional’
 - Funding the production and publishing of regional case studies of successful transformation and the development of toolkits to inspire and equip communities and highlight the enablers that moved these communities forward
 - Emphasising localism as part of a national approach

The collective strength of the three spheres of government working together collaboratively in respectful dialogue with regional communities would create a critical focus ensuring the future sustainability of the whole nation.

It is essential that governments work together with communities in long term planning for infrastructure, population growth, new investment, innovation, environmental management, provision of services and supporting community leadership for vibrancy, inclusion and confidence.

To do this all must commit to ‘breaking the mould’ – taking regional planning outside political cycles for long term outcomes. Governments can enable new approach to investment and provide appropriate incentives for change.

Rurally dependent corporations, national industry and community bodies working with regions are asked to consider:

- Refocusing how they do business so that the identity, vision and plans of each region are the core of how they relate to those regions
- Adapting the way they engage to encourage dialogue between sectors and with a broader range of organisations – focused on empowering communities
- Becoming advocates with governments for regional autonomy and respect for regional and local decision making
- Recognising the interconnectedness and interdependence of agriculture, business, community services and environmental services with community confidence and identity and developing plans across sectors to grow regions based on the strength of that interdependence

Corporations, industry bodies and national community bodies are in a critical position of influence and can all create a climate of respect and trust with regional communities, and encourage others to do likewise.

New ways of doing business that recognise and affirm regional decision-making and seek to build the strength of regions, rather than focused on sectoral interests only, are required.

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

Foundation Graduates are asked to consider taking action in their regions, as community members, as members of governments and from within their positions of influence in corporations, industry bodies and community organisations by:

- Taking this paper and the attached issues paper and beginning a discussion in your community/region
- Where they are effective, Regional Development Australia committees are a key hub for innovation and change, and graduates could work directly with these committees to drive local and regional planning
- Supporting and growing leadership from diverse sections of the community and ensuring that a wide range of voices are heard in public forums
- Helping communities access capacity building to learn how to leverage the infrastructure and expertise they have
- Encouraging and helping to organise celebrations of regional successes as a useful way to share ideas and learning and foster community cohesion
- Encouraging processes to enable communities to harness story telling as a critical tool for engaging people differently, and creating an empowering, new narrative
- Encouraging the development of new marketing tools to assist communities to see themselves and have others see them as successful (rather than as victims or battlers)

Foundation graduates have the skills, qualities and networks to assist in driving a new approach to regional Australia.

The Australian Rural Leadership Foundation is requested to:

- Circulate these papers amongst its graduates and seek feedback and support
- Share the papers with others including Commonwealth and State governments, the Australian Local Government Association, national corporations, industry bodies and community organisations