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7 OFFICE OF RURAL AFFAIRS REPORT

THE OFFICE OF RURAL AFFAIRS PROVIDES ADVICE ON LOCAL COMMUNITY SOLUTIONS TO KEY ISSUES

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

- ✓ The Country Hall Renewal Fund gave \$1m to refurbish 43 community halls.
- ✓ 11 rural communities received over \$2m in assistance to deliver affordable high speed broadband.
- ✓ ORA continued its support of community technology centres in over 82 towns.

Working within the framework of NSW Government objectives and priorities of the NSW State Plan, the Office of Rural Affairs (ORA) actively seeks opportunities for government and community to work together on sustainable economic, social and environmental developments involving country NSW.

The ORA provides strategic advice to the Minister for Rural Affairs on government and community approaches and leadership on local community solutions to key issues. It seeks to develop cooperative relationships and partnerships with the community.

The ORA works to the objectives of the NSW State Plan.

VISION

To enhance the wellbeing of people and communities in country NSW, increase ease of access to services for country people and prioritise the government focus on local needs and the strengthening of local communities.

WHAT WE DO

The ORA works to develop new and maximise current links with stakeholders and communities across NSW and through providing secretariat and policy support to the Regional Communities Consultative Council (RCCC).

The ORA is made aware of issues that have statewide country community implications by:

- responding to statewide issues that are raised through the regional coordination management groups across country NSW
- maintaining strong links with key stakeholder and non-government organisation (NGO) groups working in country NSW
- carrying out extensive consultations with small rural communities at regular intervals through the year
- through a constructive partnership with community technology centres and the Community Technology Centres Association that support over 82 individual centres in rural and isolated NSW
- mapping statewide implications of ad-hoc requests by community through the RCCC freecall 1800 number
- responding to country issues raised through Ministerial requests.

Advocacy for rural commodities submissions and presentations

The ORA and the RCCC have made submissions on the following issues.

- Ms Sue Cripps, Chief Executive Officer, Homeless NSW - Supporting letter to submission to the Federal Government's Green Paper on Homelessness.
- Senator the Hon. Stephen Conroy, Minister for Broadband, Communications

and the Digital Economy – spectrum be made available for regional Australia.

- NSW Department of Primary Industries – RCCC response to request for potential action on the Expert Social Panel Report to Government, 'It's about people: Changing perspectives on dryness'.
- Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) - RCCC response to the ACMA Spectrum Planning Discussion Paper SPP 02/09 – Release of the 3.6 GHz band for wireless access services.
- Australian Government Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy – RCCC submission on Backhaul Blackspots Initiative Stakeholder Consultation Paper.

Provided parliamentary briefings and had meetings in relation to the following inquiries and reviews.

- Legislative Assembly Standing Committee on Broadband in Rural and Regional Communities.

Are members of the following committees.

- Department of Premier & Cabinet, Regional Coordination Management Groups (rural).
- Minister for Volunteering – Volunteering forums and policy development workshops.
- Centre for Rural & Remote Mental Health Advisory Committee and the Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health Transcultural Rural & Remote Mental Health Outreach Project.
- Department of Premier & Cabinet, Drought Welfare Coordinating Committee.
- Senior Officers Committee on Drugs and Alcohol.
- Responsible Gambling Trust.
- Co-delegate on the Natural Resources Advisory Council.

- Attorney General's Department Youth Conduct Orders Advisory Committee.

Spoke at the following conferences and forums.

- Australian Telecommunications user group – regional conference – regional workshops.
- RADCOMMS09 – Radio Communications - Australian Communication Media Authority – access to spectrum for rural areas.

Judged at the following awards.

- NSW Premier's Awards.
- Regional Achievement and Community Awards (Community of the Year - Population under 15,000, Population over 15,000).

The Office of Rural Affairs also provides comment to the Minister for Rural Affairs on Rural Communities Impact Statements in NSW Government Cabinet Minutes.

The RCCC

The Regional Communities Consultative Council (RCCC) is an independent, community advisory body to the Premier and the Minister for Rural Affairs. The RCCC is comprised of an independent chair and 14 committee members drawn from regional NSW, representing a broad range of knowledge and non-government interest groups from across rural and regional community sectors. These sectors are social services, farmers, women's, young people, ethnic communities, health, Aboriginal communities, religious, trade union, local government, education, environment, business and industry and economic development.

Functions of the RCCC

The RCCC develops recommendations about ways in which government and country communities can work together to strengthen the capacity of communities to respond to local issues by:

- advocating on behalf of and raising the views of country people to government
- advising on service provision, rural policy and initiatives
- advising on access and delivery of government information to country communities
- identifying opportunities to enhance the quality of life for country people.

RCCC members, meetings and consultations

RCCC members are appointed for a two-year term.

Manager, Office of Rural Affairs

Fran Schonberg

Budget

The ORA budget allocation includes funds related to the operation of the RCCC

(\$150,000) and employee and related operating costs of the ORA itself (\$1,701,880). No capital works funding was allocated to the ORA in 2008/09.

PERFORMANCE HIGHLIGHTS

\$85 million Building the Country Package - Country Halls Renewal Fund

The Country Halls Renewal Fund provides \$2.5m over five years to assist rural communities in refurbishing and upgrade their community hall.

Community halls are invariably the centrepiece of community life for the states country towns and villages and more often than not are run by volunteers. This program invests in jobs and infrastructure to support the future and the well being of our rural communities.

Minister for Rural Affairs, Tony Kelly announced the 43 successful applications for the first round of funding totalling \$1m this financial year. This funding for new local jobs provides a great lift for community spirit and much needed repair and renovations.

The following community halls were assisted in the last financial year. Millthorpe School of Arts Hall, Euabalong Community Hall, Blighty Public Hall, Pretty Pine Community Hall, Ellenborough Hall, Hollisdale Hall, Kendall Community Hall, Pambula Town Hall, Hay War Memorial Community, Collie CWA Community Hall, Curban Community Hall, Wilcannia Hall, Neville Public Hall, Ebor War Memorial Hall, Majors Creek Recreation Hall, Barham School of Arts Hall, Bedgerabong Community Hall, Byrock Hall, Enngonia War Memorial Hall, Darnick Community Hall, Emmaville War Memorial Hall, Pilliga CWA Hall, Breeza Community Hall, Wandella Public Hall, Louth Community Hall, Gresford School of Arts Hall, Tilpa Community Hall, Baryulgil Hall, Woodstock Soldiers Memorial Hall, Binya Public Hall, Nangus Public Hall, Kentucky Memorial Hall and Literary Institute, White Cliffs Community Hall, Greenridge Soldiers Memorial Hall, Candelo Town Hall, Bobin School of Arts Hall, Ivanhoe Community Hall, Peak Hill A.I.F Memorial School of Arts Hall, Weemelah Memorial Hall, Wanaaring Community Hall, Hillston Community Hall, Smiths Road Community Hall and Fire Shed, Menindee Community Hall.

\$85 million Building the Country Package - Community Broadband Development Program

The Community Broadband Development Program provides \$11.6m over five years to deliver affordable high speed broadband to some of the more isolated communities in rural NSW.

Access to this technology supports business development, helps industries and communities to diversify their economic base and develop opportunities to enhance access and delivery of government services.

The program supports communities to identify their broadband needs, develop a business case and technical plan and negotiations for the provision of network services so that the solution is tailored to the community's current and future needs.

There were 65 applications in the first round of the program. The 11 successful communities are Wilcannia, South West Rocks, Pilliga, Quambone, Dalgety, Coleambally, Jubulum, Hill End, Goodooga, Balranald and Delegate.

\$85 million Building the Country Package - Small Communities Awareness Fund

The Small Communities Awareness Fund is \$450,000 over five years to help small communities in rural and remote NSW to supplement or establish an internet website promoting their town, businesses and tourism attractions.

Small towns are the economic and cultural backbone of country NSW and this fund will help these communities tell the world who they are and what they have to offer. These communities are often quite close to a larger centre and have features which would attract visitors and tourists, but they need to be able to reach an audience in the most cost-effective way.

The 18 successful applications that received funding this financial year to develop sites for their towns and villages were Ebor, Barraba, Wilcannia, Batlow, Millthorpe, Greenethorpe, Bonalbo, West Wyalong, Culburra Beach, freshwater angling tourism villages, Henty, Gloucester, Bulahdelah, Lake Cargelligo, Coolah, Deniliquin and Mungindi.

The Community Technology Centre Program

ORA is the State Government representative on the Community Technology Centres Association (CTCA) that supports the Community Technology Centre Program (CTC) in NSW. Community technology centres provide infrastructure, training, technology support and deliver community services to over 82 towns and villages.

ORA continues to support the CTCs by facilitating programs and services and providing ex-government computers.

CTCs offer free online access to NSW State Government information through the www.nsw.gov.au portal, some provide RTA E-toll tags for temporary use by country people travelling to Sydney as well as a range of programs on behalf of NSW Government agencies.

ORA is committed to continuing the work already put in place by the NSW Government by establishing more CTCs in rural communities and connecting them to the support and programs offered through the Community Technology Centres Association.

This expansion program supports the NSW State Plan, R4 increased participation and integration in community activities, S8 increased customer satisfaction with government services and P7 better access to training in rural and regional NSW to support local economies.

Computer reuse project

Many community groups in country towns are struggling to keep up with new regulations, taxation requirements and management responsibilities. More often than not they are also older residents who are the volunteer backbone of many community events and activities.

To support these groups ORA has been distributing decommissioned Department of Land's computers. Computers have been provided to historical societies, small country museums, environmental groups and neighbourhood centres.

The Community Technology Centres (CTCs) in over 80 smaller towns and villages are also able updating their computer banks and in turn provide tuition, training and access to software for the other community groups.

Food recovery project

The food recovery project was an initiative of the Office of Rural Affairs (ORA) in July 2008. Based on the OzHarvest Program whereby excess prepared food is donated to charities, ORA invited the Orange Ex-Services Club, Western Institute of TAFE Orange Campus, Emerge Youth and Family Services, St Vincent's Food Van, Lyndon Withdrawal Unit, Fusion and the O'Brien Centre to pilot the food recovery project in Orange.

ORA played the coordinating role and brought partners together, held meetings, disseminated legislative information and organised publicity. Currently the Western Institute of TAFE Orange Campus and Orange Ex-Services Club donate excess food from functions, conferences and cooking classes to the partner charities. This has met a real need by the charities as well as reduced waste and disposal of food by the donors. The project continues on in Orange and an information package has been created for other interested communities.

Responding to the community

The Office of Rural Affairs responds issues that are formally and informally raised to the Minister for Rural Affairs. These issues are often complex and require close collaboration with the Minister office and other Ministerial portfolios to resolve.

The projects and issues that ORA are the Ministerial office involved with are likely to:

- be complex, with multiple stakeholders with diverse expectations and priorities
- require specific tangible results to be achieved, usually within a short time frame
- require the development and implementation of integrated solutions
- have major benefits for the people, economy or environment of country NSW.

The strength of the Office of Rural Affairs is the ability to identify issues and develop whole of government and/or collaborative approaches across all agencies and community to achieve results. The office also maintains strategic alliances and partnerships that build on the strength of the RCCC, as an independent body, to ensure outcomes are achieved.

FUTURE FOCUS

To support the delivery of the NSW Government State Plan, manage the Country Halls Renewal Fund, Small Communities Awareness Fund and the Community Broadband Development Program. ORA and the RCCC will be undertaking community consultations across rural NSW to identify community views and local solutions.

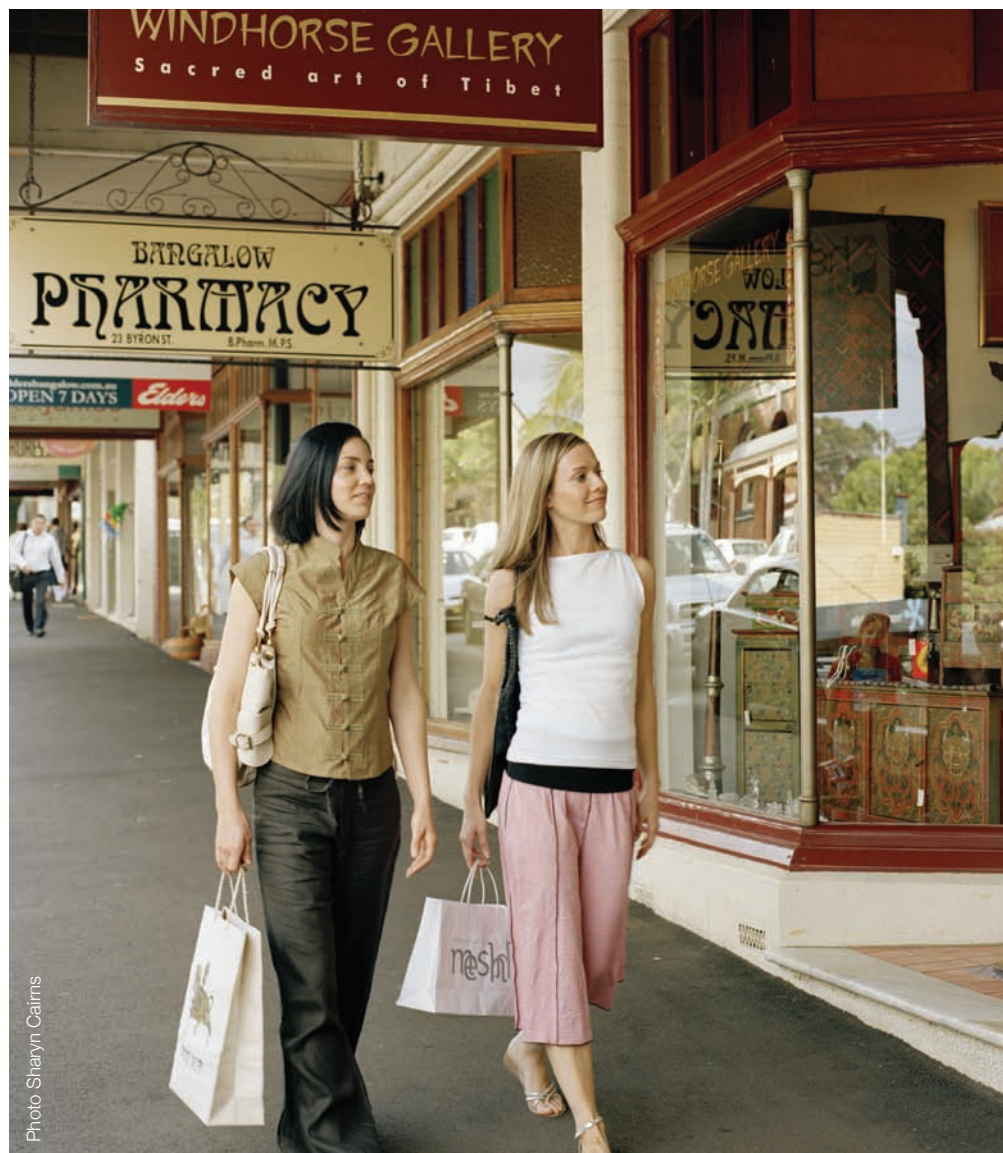


Photo Sharyn Cairns

Bangalow, Northern Rivers, NSW Far North Coast.