Office
of Rural
Affairs
Report

Working with rural
communities to harness
economic, social and
environmental opportunities
for country NSW

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Rural Affairs
Report

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

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

Vision

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

Objectives

To facilitate the objectives of the NSW State Plan, ORA has the following key priority areas:

Rights, respect and responsibility
- reduced levels of antisocial behaviour
- increased participation and integration in community activities.

Delivering better services
- increasing levels of attainment for all students
- more students complete Year 12 or recognised vocational training
- safer roads
- increased customer satisfaction with government services.

Fairness and opportunity
- improved health and education for Aboriginal people
- increased employment and community participation for people with disabilities
- improved outcomes in mental health
  - mental health readmissions
  - increased employment and community participation for people with a mental health problem

RCCC members and attendance at meetings			
Member	**Interest**	**Nominated by**	**Attendance**
Diana Gibbs (Chair till March 2007) *Term expired March 2007*	Independent	-	5(6)
Lynda Summers (Deputy Chair till March 2007, Chair from March 2007) *Term expired March 2007 – reappointed as Chair until March 2009*	Independent	-	5(7)
John Ainsworth *Term expired March 2007 – reappointed until March 2009*	Farmers	NSW Farmer's Association	5(7)
Fr Tim Cahill *Term expired March 2007 – reappointed until March 2009*	Religious communities	NSW Ecumenical Council	3(7)
Michael Madden *Term expired March 2007 – reappointed until March 2009*	Trade union	Unions NSW	4(7)
Iris White *Term expired March 2007 – reappointed until March 2009*	Aboriginal communities	Minister for Aboriginal Affairs	4(7)
Peter Quarmby *Term expired March 2007 – reappointed until March 2009*	Social services	NSW Council of Social Services	4(7)
Ruth Shanks *Term expired March 2007 – reappointed until March 2009*	Womens' interests	NSW Country Women's Association	3(7)

- embedding the principle of prevention and early intervention into government service delivery in NSW

- increased proportion of children with skills for life and learning at school entry

- reduced rates of child abuse and neglect.

Growing prosperity across NSW
- maintain and invest in infrastructure

- cutting red tape

- more people participating in education and training throughout their life

- increased business investment in rural and regional NSW

- better access to training in rural and regional NSW to support local economies.

Environment for living
- a secure and sustainable water supply

  - saving and recycling water

  - water reliability and sustainability

- better outcomes for native vegetation, biodiversity, land, rivers, and coastal waterways

- housing affordability

- more people using parks, sporting and recreational facilities, and participating in the arts and cultural activity.

Governance

The ORA develops and maintains close 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 implication by:

- responding to issues that have statewide implication that are raised through the Regional Coordination Management Groups across country NSW

- maintaining strong links with key stakeholder and Non-Government

RCCC members and attendance at meetings continued

Member	Interest	Nominated by	Attendance
Lyall Wilkinson *Term expired March 2007 – reappointed until March 2009*	Education	Federation of Parents and Citizens Association of NSW	6(7)
Rashmere Bahatti *Term expired March 2007*	Ethnic communities	Ethnic Communities Council of NSW & the Community Relations Commission	3(6)
Jenny Bonfield *Term expired March 2007*	Local government	Local Government Association of NSW and the Local Government Shires Association	2(6)
Simon Davies *Resigned January 2007*	Youth	Minister for Youth	-
Michael Schultz *Term expired March 2007*	Environment	Nature Conservation Council of NSW	4(6)
New members appointed in March 2007			
Diane Erika *Appointed March 2007 – March 2009*	Ethnic communities	Ethnic Communities Council of NSW & the Community Relations Commission	1(1)
Janet Hayes *Appointed March 2007 – March 2009*	Local government	Local Government Association of NSW and the Local Government Shires Association	1(1)
Bernadette Wenner *Appointed March 2007 – March 2009*	Youth	Minister for Youth	1(1)
Vacant	Environment	Nature Conservation Council of NSW	-
Vacant	Economic development	Economic Development Australia NSW	-

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Organisation (NGO) groups working in country NSW

- mapping statewide implications of ad-hoc requests by community through the RCCC Freecall 1800 number

- responding to country issues raised through Ministerial requests.

The RCCC

Established in August 1996, the RCCC is an independent advisory body comprised of thirteen members representing community interests, with an independent Chair and Deputy Chair. The RCCC provides advice to the Premier and the Minister for Rural Affairs on a wide range of community matters.

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 and attendance at meetings

RCCC members are appointed for a two-year term. The 2005–2007 Council term expired in March 2007. Eight members were reappointed and three new members appointed for two year terms expiring in March 2009. There are currently two vacant positions for which nominations will be sought from the representative organisations.

During the July 2006-March 2007 period, the council met on six occasions undertaking meetings and consultations in Orange, Bingara, Warialda and Menindee. During the April 2007-June 2007 period, the RCCC met for a two-day workshop to develop the new council workplan.

Administration

The ORA provides support to the Minister for Rural Affairs and the RCCC, and reports directly to the Director General of the Department of Lands.

The ORA is a small secretariat comprising the manager and two full-time support staff. Employees of Lands provide further support.

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 ($265,000). No capital works funding was allocated to the ORA in 2006/07.

Report on performance
Supporting 'Broadband for the Bush'

Telecommunications and broadband expansion is a major vehicle for regional development and social enhancement. The range of community benefits enabled through the use of such technologies supports community sustainability both economically and socially.

To facilitate access for rural communities the ORA is participating in the Commonwealth Government Clever Networks program, part of the $1.1 billion Connect Australia package. Under the program the ORA has

applied for a Broadband Development Officer as well as provided a significant commitment to the NSW Government's Broadband for the Bush program.

To support communities ORA is undertaking a technology awareness program that will assist country towns to:

- attract new business into rural and regional communities

- facilitate growth and development for traditional businesses competing in the global marketplace

- provide better access to services, improving quality of life and reducing the pressure on young people to relocate from the country to the city for training

- retain skills and support skills transfer in regional and rural communities

- create jobs in new information based sectors

- deliver better information and service provision outcomes

- support lifestyle choices – better balancing work, family and recreation.

The following programs are supported by the ORA.

The Community Technology Centre Program

The Community Technology Centre Program (CTC) transferred to the Minister for Rural Affairs in 2006. The ORA is the government representative on the management committee and supports the centres by ensuring they deliver government and community services as well as offer free computer access to NSW State Government information.

Community technology centres are a resource hub that provides infrastructure and resources to support service delivery in over 80 rural towns. The centres employ regional people and have over 1,200 volunteers committed to serving their local communities.

It is estimated that 2,700 first time computer users were trained in a CTC in the last financial year with a total average of 6,160 people being trained in computers throughout the centres. In 2006 154 volunteers in 24 centres gained employment from volunteering at a CTC.

Australia's First Annual Public Broadband Summit

The ORA promoted and was a sponsor for rural and remote community leaders to participate in 'Australia's First Annual Public Broadband Summit'. The summit brought together public officials, policy-makers, service providers and technology providers to explore key aspects of the industry.

Expert speakers from Australia and the US shared their experiences about the economic impact, the digital divide, competition and consumer choice, emerging technologies, case studies, public policy implications and opportunities for communities using new technologies.

The Gwydir Learning Region

The ORA has been facilitating the expansion of the Gwydir Learning Region model to other rural and remote communities. The model supports communities to invest time and access training locally for their young people and adults to encourage them to continue their education and access work experience in their local towns.

The vocational education program for the Gwydir area has been fully evaluated and has won a number of state and national awards.

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The Gwydir Learning Region enables individuals and community to regain control of their futures to build confidence and maintain a sense of pride and achievement. The key to success is getting a whole community to value learning, emphasising the value of youth, actively seeking opportunities and possibilities, flexibility and the use of new technologies to deliver training locally and strong partnerships between local and state governments, business and industry, education providers and the community.

Pilliga and Gwabegar CommunityLink, Community Technology Centres

The ORA has developed an alternate governance model for these small community organisations and committees. Pilliga and Gwabegar CommunityLink, Community Technology Centres required support to be able to deliver the services their community required.

A partnership model has been developed that links local and state government and the community to support the centres. Each partner provides expertise, support and shares responsibility of community activity and local service provision. Local government supports the infrastructure, the Community Technology Centre Association provides the financial and grant seeker support and the ORA coordinates the management of the centres.

The communities feel they are supported to take advantage of programs that previously were seen as too much of a burden for a small local management committee. This now allows a vast range of activities to be run in the towns as well as providing a secure management base for the funding bodies.

Keeping in touch with communities

The ORA undertook community consultations and meetings in Gwabegar, Pilliga, Bingara, Coolamon, Baradine, Cootamundra, Mungindi, Boggabilla, Warialda, Walgett, Coonamble, Moree, Narrabri, Menindee, Wallaga Lake and Bermagui.

The ORA is a member of the rural NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet, Regional Coordination Management Groups and meets with the constituent groups of the RCCC.

The ORA and the RCCC provided rural communities' views and issues to the Minister for Rural Affairs which were used to inform priority areas of the NSW Government State Plan. Information gained during these consultations and meetings was also disseminated across a number of Ministerial portfolios.

Future focus

To support the work of the NSW Government Rural and Regional Task Force and the NSW Government State Plan the ORA and the RCCC will be undertaking community consultations across rural NSW.

Issues to be identified for the Taskforce are:

- demographic trends in individual rural and regional areas

- current and emerging factors driving changes in demand for, and the delivery of, services to rural and regional communities

- identifying potential actions to address current and emerging economic, environmental and social issues affecting rural and regional communities across NSW.