

Office of Rural Affairs REPORT



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



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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 leadership and strategic advice to the Minister for Rural Affairs 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, the ORA has the following key priority areas.

Rights, respect and responsibility

- R3** Reduced levels of antisocial behaviour.
- R4** Increased participation and integration in community activities.

Delivering better services

- S4** Increasing levels of attainment for all students.
- S5** More students complete Year 12 or recognised vocational training.
- S7** Safer roads.

- S8** Increased customer satisfaction with government services.

Fairness and opportunity

- F1** Improved health and education for Aboriginal people.
- F2** Increased employment and community participation for people with disabilities.
- F3** Improved outcomes in mental health.
- F4** Embedding prevention and early intervention into government services.
- F6** Increased proportion of children with skills for life and learning at school entry.
- F7** Reduced rates of child abuse and neglect.

Growing prosperity across NSW

- P2** Maintain and invest in infrastructure.
- P3** Cutting red tape.
- P4** More people participating in education and training throughout their life.
- P6** Increased business investment in rural and regional NSW.
- P7** Better access to training in rural and regional NSW to support local economies.

Environment for living

- E1** A secure and sustainable water supply for all users.
- E4** Better outcomes for native vegetation, biodiversity, land, rivers, and coastal waterways.
- E6** Housing affordability.
- E8** More people using parks, sporting and recreational facilities, and participating in the arts and cultural activity.

Governance

The ORA works to develop new and maximise current 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 implications by:

- responding to statewide issues that are raised through 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



“ The ORA provides leadership and strategic advice to the Minister for Rural Affairs on government and community approaches to issues ”

- maintaining a constructive partnership with the Community Technology Centres and the Community Technology Centres Association that support over 120 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.

Submissions and presentations

The ORA and the RCCC have made submissions into NSW Parliamentary inquiries, Ministerial inquiries and agency inquires on the following issues.

- Legislative Assembly Standing Committee on Broadband in Rural and Regional Communities.
- NSW Parliament Standing Committee on State Development - Inquiry into Aspects of Agriculture in NSW.
- Standing Committee on Social Issues - Inquiry into Closing the Gap – Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage.
- The Hon. H Woods, NSW Ministry for

Transport – Private Vehicle Conveyance Scheme Review.

- The General Manager Roads and Traffic Authority – Licensing of older driver discussion paper.

The ORA and RCCC have 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.
- The Hon. H Woods, NSW Ministry for Transport – Private Vehicle Conveyance Scheme Review.
- The Department of Premier & Cabinet review on the Department of State and Regional Development.

The ORA and RCCC 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 Community Services, Communities Division Partner’s Reference Group.
- Department of Premier & Cabinet, Capacity Development Subcommittee of the Remote Areas Attraction and Retention Pilot Steering Committee.
- 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.

The ORA and RCCC spoke at the following conferences and forums.

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

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- Department of State & Regional Development, Community Economic Development Conference, Moama.
- WiMax Conference – emerging regional wireless technologies.
- Forest Plantation Forum – Albury Chair.

The ORA and RCCC 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).

Comment has also been provided to the Minister for Rural Affairs on Federal Government inquiries into:

- better support for carers
- 'Which way Home' A new approach to Homelessness
- increasing Indigenous economic opportunity
- a new regional development funding program.

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 New South Wales, 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. The 2007–2009 council term expires in March 2009.

During 2007 the RCCC was invited to participate in the consultation process of the NSW Rural and Regional Taskforce. The RCCC actively consulted 113 smaller villages and communities in non-metropolitan NSW on behalf of the taskforce. These consultations were of fundamental significance to a section of the NSW rural population who would otherwise have had no face-to-face input into this important process.

The RCCC aims to be a visible presence in country NSW. To this end it has held regular meetings in centres such as Canowindra, Uralla, Eden, Bellingen and Sydney, and held a two-day workshop in Orange. In addition teleconferences have linked members right across NSW.

Administration

The ORA provides standard public service policy support and advice to the Minister for Rural Affairs. In addition it provides an important link between the Minister and rural communities, secretariat and other services to the Regional Communities Consultative Council and an important link between the RCCC and the Minister. The ORA reports directly to the Director General of the Department of Lands.



“The ORA provides an important link between the Minister, rural communities and the Regional Communities Consultative Council”

The ORA 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 (\$318,000). No capital works funding was allocated to the ORA in 2007/08.

Report on performance

Rural and Regional Taskforce

On 25 June 2007 the Premier, Morris Iemma, announced the establishment of a Rural and Regional Taskforce (RRT) to examine and provide advice on key economic, environmental and social

issues affecting rural and regional communities across NSW.

The RRT undertook its review in the rural areas of NSW outside the Hunter, Illawarra, Central Coast and Sydney. The taskforce membership is:

- Dr Col Gellatly (Chairperson), Former Director General of the Department of Premier and Cabinet
- The Hon. Richard Torbay, Speaker of the NSW Legislative Assembly, and Member for Northern Tablelands.
- Steve Whan, Member for Monaro and Convenor of Country Labor.

Terms of reference

The taskforce has been requested to:

- examine the profile of, and demographic trends in, individual rural and regional areas
- examine the current and emerging factors driving changes in demand for, and the delivery of, services to rural and regional communities
- identify potential actions to address current and emerging economic, environmental and social issues affecting rural and regional communities across NSW.

During 2007 the Office of Rural Affairs and the RCCC was invited to participate in the consultation process of the NSW Rural and Regional Taskforce.

The taskforce held consultations in the larger centres of Parkes, Wagga Wagga, Cooma, Armidale, Grafton and Broken Hill. The ORA and the RCCC undertook widespread consultations in the smaller communities from one end of the state to the other. These consultations ensured access, input and participation by members of the smaller communities unable to attend the scheduled taskforce sessions at the larger centres. ORA and the RCCC continued this important role with attendance at each of the main regional Taskforce consultation sessions.

Consultation methodology

The methodology included the utilisation of the RCCC constituent groups which had members in many of the towns and villages visited. Open community meetings, the formation of working groups within geographic regions and travelling to towns and villages to interview community members was the method used by the ORA and the RCCC to ascertain community views.

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The RCCC also encouraged groups and individuals, via print and electronic media coverage, to submit their own individual submissions to the taskforce.

Locations consulted

The ORA and the RCCC consulted in the following regions and towns.

Western Region

Blayney, Canowindra, Carcoar, Condobolin, Cowra, Dubbo, Forbes, Gulgong, Lake Cargelligo, Lyndhurst, Narromine, Orange, Parkes, Peak Hill, Tomingley, Tooraweenah, Trangie, Tullibigeal, Ungarie, West Wyalong and Wongarbron.

South East Region

Adelong, Bredbo, Cooma, Delegate, Michelago, Moruya, Nimmitabel, Talbingo, Tumut and Wallaga Lake.

Riverina Murray Region

Ardlethan, Ariah Park, Barellan, Bendick Murrell, Henty, Koorawatha, Rankin Springs, Stockinbingal, Temora, The Rock, Uranquinty, Wallendbeen, Weethalle, Wombat, Yerong Creek and Young.

New England North West Region

Aberdeen, Bendemeer, Baan Bar, Black Mountain, Blandford, Boggabri, Byalong, Cassilis, Coolah, Caroon, Currabubula, Dunedoo, Dungowan, Elong Elong, Elsmore, Glencoe, Gulgong, Guyra, Llangothlin, Merriwa, Mudgee, Murrundi, Narrabri, Nundle, Parkville, Premer, Scone, Tingha, Uralla, Wallabadah, Wee Waa, Wingen and Woolomin.

North Coast Region

Ashford, Barraba, Bell, Bingara, Bonalbo, Boggabilla, Bundarra, Coramba, Cobbadah, Coraki, Crescent Head, Deepwater, Dorrigo, Ebor, Eungai Rail, Glenreagh, Nana Glen, Jerseyville, Kyogle, Manilla, Nimbin, North Star, Nymboida, Stuarts Point, Scott's Head, Tenterfield, Urbenville, Urunga, Warialda, Woodburn, Woodenbong, Wollombi and Yetman.

Report content

A report was presented to the NSW Rural & Regional Taskforce outlining a synopsis and analysis of the views and issues raised by members of the smaller communities visited or consulted by the RCCC. Contents include a discussion of emerging issues together with:

- analysis and synopsis of some successful strategies identified by communities during the consultation process and recommendations of potential options to address the issues raised
- a summary of participants input.

During the consultation process many local issues were uncovered by the ORA and RCCC which did not require referral to the taskforce. These local issues were able to be addressed by the Office of Rural Affairs in conjunction with the Office of the Minister and other agencies. This ability to identify and address local issues that would have otherwise slipped through the cracks has been ongoing and of great advantage to the communities and government.

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 in NSW. Community Technology Centres (CTC) provide infrastructure, training, technology support and deliver community services to over 80 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 and the Australian Taxation Office (ETAX) and deliver 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.



“ORA is committed to continuing the work already put in place by the NSW Government by establishing more community technology centres in rural communities”

The Gwydir learning region

The Gwydir learning region model facilitates access to education and training in local areas, reskilling the community and instilling an appreciation of the importance of lifelong learning. The ORA has continued to support the expansion of the Gwydir learning region model by facilitating meetings with state and federal Ministers, agencies and local community groups.

Local government, businesses, educators and the community invest time and training in the young people, unemployed and mature age workers who increasingly seek opportunities for learning and re-skilling. Local access and support, along with flexible delivery encourages community members to continue with their education throughout their lives.

The Gwydir learning region enables individuals and community to regain control of their future, build confidence and maintain a sense of pride and achievement. The ORA intends to continue its support for such a vital learning and capacity building vehicle for rural and regional NSW.

Telecommunications and broadband for rural and regional NSW

The Office of Rural Affairs has been working with a panel of experts looking at rural telecommunications from a technical, regional development, service delivery, governance and equity perspective.

Rural issues identified are:

- the debate over specific technology requirements is being superseded by the economic imperative of participation in global networks and the digital economy
- traditional models cannot and do not drive competitiveness in the regional market
- open access to infrastructure is the key to economic revival, social resilience, sustainability, and equity in rural and regional areas
- planning and education is about maximising access and the applications that broadband can deliver is key for rural and regional communities.

The ORA has been working with the Regional Development Advisory Council

to facilitate telecommunications planning across rural NSW. The proposed adoption of a regional development model of engagement and planning will identify local assets and needs and will have the capacity to design locally tailored technology solutions which will deliver the outcomes the community require.

The ORA has also been working with the Australian Telecommunications Users Group (ATUG) to provide information through their roadshow program about new technologies and applications in rural and regional NSW.

The ORA is also supporting the Online and Communications Council (OCC) Indigenous Telecommunications Working Group, the peak inter-jurisdictional Ministerial forum for national telecommunications issues, by providing information on specific rural and isolated community needs to support the Backing Indigenous Ability Program rollout in NSW.

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

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older residents who are the volunteer backbone of many community events and activities.

To support these groups the ORA has been distributing decommissioned Lands computers. Computers have been provided to historical societies, small country museums, environmental groups and neighbourhood centres.

The Community Technology Centres 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.

Supporting communities

The ORA works with local communities as a neutral broker and/or liaison where there are issues with local groups, community and government or state government regulation or legislation. The ORA supports communities by working with them to access information and support and develop a local solution to issues.

The ORA undertook community consultations and meetings in Bingara, Lightning Ridge, Bermagui, Barradine, Wallaga Lake, Canowindra, Gwabegar, Pilliga and Bonalbo.

ORA was asked to assist the office of The Hon. E Roozendaal MLC to coordinate a two-day holiday in Sydney for a number of drought-affected rural families. The package was two nights accommodation, tickets for a Sydney Harbour Bridge climb and a cricket match

at the SCG for families from Yeoval, Adjungbilly, Yass, Barmedman, Warren and Lake Cargelligo. The ORA liaised with St Vincent DePaul and NSW Farmers to provide travel and meal assistance as most of the families lived further than a day's driving distance from Sydney.

Future focus

To support the delivery of the NSW Government State Plan the ORA and the RCCC will be undertaking community consultations across rural NSW to identify community views and local solutions.

Support rollout of the national broadband network to ensure rural and remote NSW communities undertake local planning and identify technical solutions that deliver an outcome tailored to their individual communities needs.

Facilitating access to natural resource management information and education; in particular, awareness of the rapidly changing technologies that will underpin environmental sustainability for future generations.

Current endeavours of the Office of Rural Affairs centre around working with rural communities to develop new social infrastructure partnership models. This is essential to support communities who want to invest in the growth of their social capital.

Facilitating information and access to tags or passes for country people to use toll roads when driving in Sydney and developing a local distribution model for clubs, pubs and catering businesses to provide excess food to local charities.