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Tanya Cameron
National President



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Committee Secretary

Select Committee on Regional Australia
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Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

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Dear Committee Secretary,

CWAA submission – Inquiry into regional Australia

The Country Women's Association of Australia (CWAA) appreciates the opportunity to provide a submission for the Committee's Inquiry into Regional Australia. The CWAA's objective is to advance the rights and equity of women, families and communities in Australia through advocacy and empowerment, especially for those living in regional, rural and remote Australia.

The policy and advocacy efforts of the CWAA of Australia are largely centered around equity of access to services in rural, regional and remote (RRR) areas. This work focuses predominately in the health, education, connectivity and cost of living elements of RRR life. We also have a strong mandate to support and advocate for the improvement to rural, regional and remote communities – for example by supporting and encouraging investment in regional infrastructure, strong local economies and job creation and support for rural industries like agriculture. Addressing social problems like rates of drug and alcohol use in rural regional and remote Australia, unemployment, poverty, hunger, family violence and homelessness are also a large part of our advocacy work.

The CWAA welcomes this inquiry and believes that it is an important opportunity to identify the ways that the provision of services and quality of life can be improved for rurally based Australians, and to work towards achieving equity of access. We also believe it is an important and timely opportunity to identify ways in which we can enhance livability in regions so as to reduce pressure and the negative impacts of overpopulation in capital cities. There are research organisations producing very thorough work on these very issues, such as the Regional Australia Institute who have identified ways to target regional growth prospects strategically so as to maximize growth in the food processing, tourism, advanced manufacturing and creative industries¹.

¹ Achurch, H. (2019) *Regional Growth Prospects: Strategic Investment in Food Processing, Tourism, Advanced Manufacturing and Creative Industries*. Canberra, The Regional Australia Institute.

Equity of access

The approximate 7 million people living outside of Australia's capital cities on average, are not able to access the same high standard of health and wellbeing as people in the cities². According to the National Rural Health Alliance Ltd, the mal-distribution of the medical, dental and health workforce in Australia is a key barrier in the delivery of effective, comprehensive health care³. Efforts to address the barriers to securing the health workforce need to be prioritised.

In 2017, along with the National Farmers Federation, the CWA of Australia commissioned Royal Flying Doctor Service research into the health needs of RRR Australia. The survey of 450 country people drawn from every state and territory saw one-third of responses (32.5%) name doctor and medical specialist access as their key priority. Addressing mental health (12.2%) and drug and alcohol problems (4.1%) were second and third priorities⁴.

The CWAA current priorities for improved RRR health services includes: addressing the shortage of general practitioners (GP's) in RRR areas, addressing the problems and difficulties with recruiting and retraining specialists, specialist nurses and allied health care professionals, improving the opportunities for RRR people to access dental care, improving drug and alcohol support and rehabilitation services, increasing mental health services, improving and enhancing support for those with chronic or terminal illness , as well as their families and carers, and addressing the downgrading of local hospitals.

Educational disadvantage in rural and regional schools has been well documented. According to Lamb et al, location and isolation, high-teacher turnover, low retention rates, school size and staffing (less teachers), lack of program breadth, and lack of capacity to raise funds, are some of the factors for this disadvantage. Wider societal factors including economic conditions, limited cultural facilities in the community, and local industry structure, are also attributable⁵.

The CWAA advocates for an increased focus for achieving equity of access to essential services like health services, and quality education as a matter of priority.

Improvement to and strengthening of rural communities

Regional infrastructure, in particular roads and bridges, has been consistently raised by our members as an item that is often neglected in terms of budgeting from both the Federal and State Government. From time to time there are initiatives that assist the enormous challenge, faced mostly by local government, of ensuring all roads are safe, and bridges are workable and meet society's expectation in terms of modern standards. These initiatives usually come during an election, or responses to specific pressure or issues.

Sometimes where mining or an extractive industry is involved, the Federal Government or the mining company will contribute funding to a specific fund or project, for example, the 'Royalties for Regions' funding stream administered by the West Australian and Queensland state governments. These can be welcome boosts to regional areas; however, they are ad hoc, and not applied uniformly in all areas of the country where funding for essentials is desperately needed. The CWAA advocates for an increase to regional funding across the board, particularly for critical infrastructure like roads.

² *National Rural Health Alliance Ltd* 'New and Old Issues in Rural and Remote Health' [Fact Sheet] Accessed November 2019 available at ruralhealth.org.au/advocacy/knowning-the-issues.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ The full report can be accessed at <https://cwa.org.au/advocacy-policy/rural-health/2-uncategorised/10-royal-flying-doctor-service-rfdds-research-august-2017>

⁵ Lamb, Stephen, and Glover, Sara *Educational Disadvantage and Regional and Rural Schools* Mitchell Institute for Health and Education Policy , Victoria University , 2014 pages 65-70.

Connectivity and access to modern telecommunications is another basic service that is lacking for many rural Australians. The lack of quality internet and mobile phone coverage is problematic not only for health, safety and day to day living reasons, it curbs the potential of the development of regional Australian businesses and economies. According to the ABS, there is a higher proportion of business owners in regional Australia than in Metro Australia⁶. Furthermore, according to the Regional Australia Institute rural and remote regions may be negatively impacted by the technological changes facing Australia's workforce because they often do not have the same level of infrastructure and technological readiness as other regions⁷. Inland regions therefore may not see the same level of growth in digital jobs or be able to react as quickly to changes in the nature of work as other regions.

Regional people are more isolated and therefore require communications for health, safety and the economic stability of the regions. Regional connectivity is improving, for example, with the introduction of the NBN Skymuster and more recently Skymuster Plus services, as well as the Federal Government's mobile blackspot funding commitment and investment in improving regional Australia's connectivity⁸. However, there is a long way to go and the CWAA continues to support and encourage a focus on improving Australia's regional telecommunications.

In light of population pressure in capital cities, and the soaring cost of living and housing unaffordability (not to mention increased rates of homelessness in Australia's major cities⁹), the CWAA advocates strongly for regional funding to ensure that regional Australia can attract a workforce, especially health professionals, and that infrastructure, connectivity and social services are adequate in regional areas so as to sustain and improve regional quality of life.

Yours faithfully,



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⁶[https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/1380.0.55.008~2011~Media%20Release~High%20proportion%20of%20business%20owners%20in%20regional%20areas%20\(Media%20Release\)~161](https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/1380.0.55.008~2011~Media%20Release~High%20proportion%20of%20business%20owners%20in%20regional%20areas%20(Media%20Release)~161)

⁷ Houghton K., 2019, The future of regional jobs, The Regional Australia Institute, Canberra.

⁸ <https://www.communications.gov.au/what-we-do/internet/regional-connectivity-program>

⁹ Parkinson, S., Batterham, D., Reynolds, M. and Wood, G. (2019) The changing geography of homelessness: a spatial analysis from 2001 to 2016, AHURI Final Report No. 313, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/313>, doi:10.18408/ahuri-5119601.