

Submission to the Inquiry into Creating Sustainable Economic Growth in Rural and Regional Australia

From: Celeste Pater

Date: 7/09/2025

Introduction

I am a sixth-generation Australian with deep family ties to Gippsland, Victoria. Farming, regional shows, and rural community life have been at the heart of my family for generations. I once believed I could carry on this tradition - even part-time - but my grandfather, who has spent his life on the land, told me bluntly that "farming's done in this country." I understand why he feels this way: policies are stacked against small farmers, infrastructure is neglected, and it often feels like the government could take land whenever it suits them while everyday people are left powerless.

I am now pursuing a career in child care, but I still care deeply about the future of rural and regional Australia. I want to contribute because I have seen firsthand how regional communities are being squeezed, ignored, or undermined by decisions made in the cities. City-based policymakers often dismiss or roll their eyes at rural issues, and the consequences are real: rising costs, barriers to starting businesses, loss of heritage, and hollowing out of local economies.

(a) Improving domestic and international marketing of "clean and green" agriculture

Products like Victorian beef, Gippsland dairy, and regional wines already have a global reputation for quality. That should be celebrated and strengthened. But too often, infrastructure and support are dismantled rather than improved. Stockyards are being closed, leaving farmers with no choice but to hire private facilities at huge cost, sometimes up to \$10,000. This is not helping rural communities thrive; it is pushing them toward collapse.

Australian produce is world-class, but we need government policy to actively support, promote, and protect these sectors rather than create unnecessary hurdles. Campaigns showcasing the quality, traceability, and regional heritage of Australian products would help both domestic and international markets understand the value of our "clean and green" agriculture.

(b) Supporting rural and regional small and medium businesses

It is often unnecessarily difficult to start or operate a business in regional Victoria. Red tape, costs, and lack of support leave small operators at a disadvantage, while larger corporations benefit from economies of scale.

If the government is serious about supporting small and medium businesses, we need:

- Real pathways for new farmers and small operators, including grants, mentoring, and regulatory support.
- Regional sponsorship and relocation pathways for people who want to live and work in the country. This could include young Australians who might move from cities, instead of defaulting to foreign labor.
- Protection from urban encroachment, so farmland is not continually lost to housing developments.

Certification and labelling should work for smaller producers as well as larger ones. Regional branding or "origin" schemes like Europe's protected designation systems could help communities preserve identity, increase recognition, and maintain competitive advantage.

(c) Aligning tourism with food and drink experiences

Festivals, farmers' markets, food trails, and regional shows are not just cultural events; they are economic lifelines for rural communities. Linking agriculture and tourism more strongly could create new opportunities for local producers, attract visitors, and increase exports.

Investment must flow into infrastructure that benefits communities directly, not just large tour operators. Proper roads, local accommodation, and festival support ensure that money stays in the regions.

Broader Concerns

I want to speak honestly about labour shortages and the future of rural life. Too often, governments' solutions are mass immigration or temporary foreign workers. While that may fix short-term numbers, it does not build strong, enduring communities.

There are people in cities who would happily relocate to rural areas if the right pathways and support existed. Programs to help Australians move regionally, combined with support for starting farms or businesses, would strengthen communities far more than relying on temporary or overseas labor.

I know this personally: I was devastated to leave Gippsland and move to Pakenham for work. The traffic, crowding, and lifestyle changes show how unsustainable city growth has become. Regional life is being pushed aside, and younger generations are losing the chance to live on the land, even part-time. Rising costs, regulatory burdens, and lack of support make farming feel unattainable. This is not just an economic problem - it is cultural and generational.

Heritage and traditional farming practices are being lost. If the government wants to promote sustainable growth, it cannot just focus on numbers, trade, or exports - it must protect families, preserve traditions, and give the next generation a real chance to remain in or return to the country.

Recommendations

- Strengthen "Australian Grown" and regional branding to highlight clean, green produce and regional identity.
- Reinvest in rural infrastructure such as stockyards, transport, and export facilities.
- Create sponsorships, grants, and mentoring programs for new farmers and small regional businesses.
- Protect farmland from urban sprawl and housing development.
- Support festivals, farmers' markets, and food tourism as central to economic growth and regional culture.
- Address labour shortages by supporting Australians to relocate regionally rather than defaulting to foreign labor.
- Ensure benefits of economic growth flow to local communities and traditional farming families, not just corporations.

Closing

Rural and regional Australia has carried this country for generations. Sustainable economic growth should strengthen these communities, protect heritage, and ensure the next generation has a real opportunity to live and work on the land. Policies that undermine small operators, remove infrastructure, or ignore the people of the regions will only hollow out communities and destroy livelihoods.

I urge the Committee to listen to the voices of people on the ground and make decisions that truly support rural and regional Australians.

Sincerely,

Celeste Pater