

## RDA Riverina Submission to the Select Committee on Regional Australia



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## Background

Regional Development Australia-Riverina (RDA-Riverina) is part of an Australian Government initiative based on building partnerships and ensuring that all governments and stakeholders are responsive to local priorities and needs. It is a conduit between government and local communities, and a provider of information.

RDA-Riverina is a non-profit, community-based organisation, with a committee of 12 members spanning 14 local government areas who represent local communities, businesses and local government. RDA-Riverina's committee has a broad and diverse skills base and demonstrated networks and alliances. RDAs are champions for local communities, working towards developing local solutions to local problems, and ensuring the prosperity of the regions.

RDA Committees have an active and facilitative role in their communities and a clear focus on growing strong and confident regional economies that harness their competitive advantages, seize on economic opportunity and attract investment.

### THE RDA NATIONAL CHARTER

Working in close partnership with fellow RDA Committees, all levels of government, and the private sector, RDA Committees:

1. Collaborate with relevant stakeholders to identify economic opportunities and leverage private and public sector investment to the regions;
2. Connect regional businesses, councils and industry sectors with international trade partners, financial markets and potential investors;
3. Promote and disseminate information on Australian Government policies and grant programs to state and local governments and industry, business and community sectors;
4. Support community stakeholders to develop project proposals to access funding;
5. Develop and maintain positive working relationships with the local government bodies in their regions;
6. Facilitate public and private sector decentralisation;
7. Assist in the delivery of Australian Government programs, where relevant and where requested by the Minister;
8. Engage with regional entrepreneurs and emerging business leaders to explore new opportunities to grow local jobs in their regions;
9. Provide information on their region's activities and competitive advantages to all levels of government, industry, business and community sectors; and
10. Provide evidence-based advice to the Australian Government on critical regional development issues positively and negatively affecting their regions.

## 1. Examining the effectiveness of existing regional service delivery and development programs;

From an RDA perspective, we are well integrated into our Riverina regional community and partner with many other organisations to fulfil our charter to the best of our ability and as funding allows. RDA Riverina plays a pivotal role in ensuring the long-term sustainability of the Riverina. Through collaboration, knowledge sharing and facilitation, RDA Riverina leverages the skills and expertise of its networks to develop local solutions to local problems. The results are evidenced by the number of regional businesses, councils, industry sectors and community groups supported each year, and the region-relevant advice given to Government on issues critical to the economic prosperity of the Riverina. Over the last 3 years the focus has been on workforce development (see figure 1 below).

### Workforce Development Plan

In 2018 RDA Riverina brought together several existing programs under the banner of Workforce Development for the Riverina. As Executive Officer, Rachel Whiting said, "Our Workforce Development Plan is all about getting the people we need in the region and encouraging economic development. It's exactly what we've been doing all along, but now it's coming together in a centralised plan."

This four-pronged plan is a response to the anticipated shortage of 10,000 workers in the next 3-5 years. The RDA Riverina workforce development plan acknowledges

this shortage is due to industry growth, aging workers and increased service industry positions that align with increased population.

RDA Riverina also continue to closely monitor the impact that Snowy Hydro 2.0 will have on existing workforce demands and where relocation to the region will be necessary. "RDA Riverina help employers find the right people for their business and potential employees to find careers that suit them as we build our local economy." Rachel Whiting, CEO and Director of Regional Development, RDA Riverina

The four quadrants of RDA Riverina's Workforce Development Plan are:

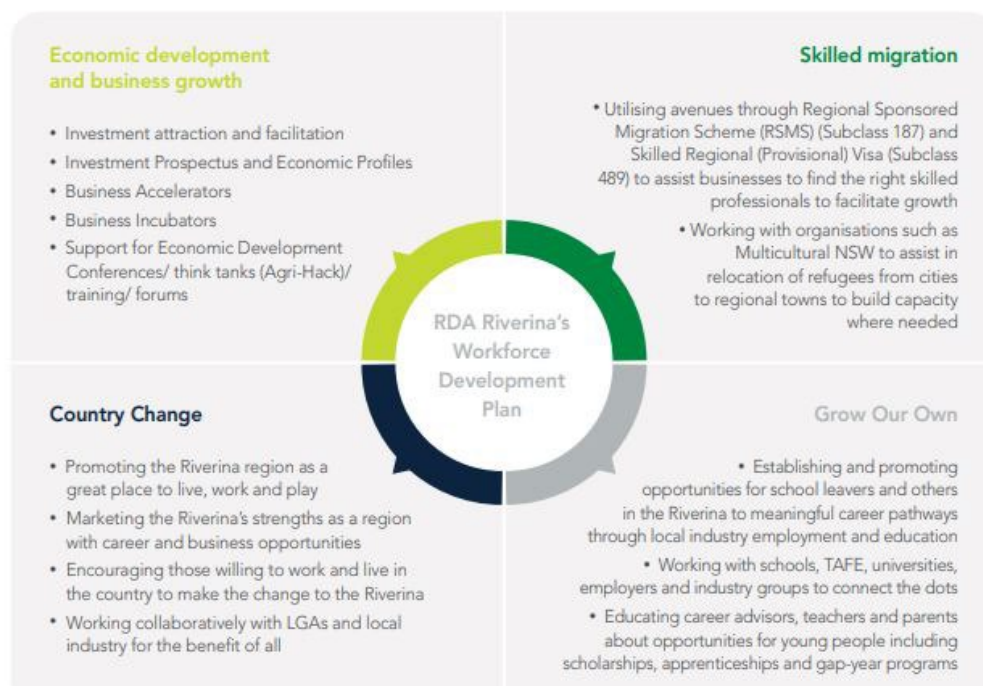


Figure 1 RDA Riverina Annual Report 2018/2019, p20

There is no doubt that these programs could have better reach if more funding was available. Here is a list of our programs with a brief overview of how they are funded:

- Grow Our Own - In 2019 RDA Riverina has been fortunate to obtain funding for the STEM Industry Schools Partnership program for the Western Riverina (around Griffith schools) from the NSW Department of Education which gives enormous weight to the Grow Our Own program. Grow Our Own works with schools and industry, helping young people to find pathways to employment and training in order to find careers in the Riverina region.
- Skilled Migration (a much-needed service in our region) RDA Riverina are a Regional Certifying Body (RCB) and this service is funded by application payments made by participating migrants and businesses,
- Country Change is a collaboratively funded program through RDA Riverina and local councils. It promotes the Riverina to encourage relocation to the Riverina.
- Business Development - We have run two very successful business accelerators funded separately through the NSW and Commonwealth Governments however there is no funding identified for this project in the future.
- Secondary Refugee Resettlement – we are developing a pilot program with Multicultural NSW and the Commonwealth Department of Employment to support the settlement of refugees from western Sydney to the Riverina. Country Change was used as an information source and a profile when talking to potential secondary refugees for resettlement from Western Sydney to the Riverina in May 2019. Previous migration of different ethnic groups and available jobs in the Riverina were highlighted to these potential migrant relocators.
- Grant writing and support – RDA Riverina assist individuals and business with grant writing through their core Commonwealth funding and fee-for-service work
- Riverina profile, data and statistics – RDA Riverina assist individuals and business with proposals, investment impact analysis and business plans through their core Commonwealth funding and fee-for-service work
- RDA Riverina can also offer secretariat services and have recently taken over the Executive Officer role for the Riverina's tourism association – Thrive Riverina

The benefit to the region for RDA Riverina to run these programs is our strong relationships in the region and ability to collaborate with others for community and economic development.

## **2. Examining the contribution and role of regional Australia to our national identity, economy and environment;**

The Riverina is an agricultural region of south-western New South Wales (NSW), which extends from the foothills of the Snowy Mountains north west through the Murrumbidgee River catchment area to the flat dry inland plains of Hay and Carrathool. The RDA Riverina region covers an area of 80,545km<sup>2</sup> and services an estimated population of 171,158 (REMPAN, as of June 30, 2019). It comprises the regional cities of Wagga Wagga and Griffith and the local government areas of Bland, Carrathool, Coolamon, Gundagai, Hay, Junee, Leeton, Lockhart, Murrumbidgee, Narrandera, Snowy Valleys and Temora.

The Riverina has a Median Weekly Household income of \$1,517, 39.85 Median Age and contributes \$11.9 Billion per annum Gross Regional Product. The labour force participation rate for the Riverina is estimated at 66.02% as of March 2019 with an unemployment rate of 4.3%. The Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing industry sector is the Riverina's largest employer with 9,991 jobs or 13.3% (REMPAN), followed by Healthcare and Social Assistance at 9,619 (12.8%) (REMPAN).

**Employment** is primarily driven by agribusiness and service industries. RDA Riverina estimates that **89,561** people were in the labour force in the Riverina region as of **March 2019**.



Gross Regional  
Product

**\$11.9 Billion**



Median  
Age

**39.85**



Median Weekly  
Household Income

**\$1,517**

Figure 2 RDA Riverina Annual Report 2018/2019, p9

The Murrumbidgee River runs through the Riverina region and delivers water to major food producing areas of the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area (MIA) and Coleambally Irrigation Area (CIA). These irrigation areas provide over one-quarter of all the fruit and vegetable production in NSW and are also one of Australia's largest exporters of bulk wines. Further growth in Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing is being experienced in cotton, aquaculture and nut industries. The Riverina's burgeoning food culture currently presents numerous opportunities for businesses. The diversity of the produce grown in the area is unmatched and has enhanced the attractiveness of the region. It also home to a strong education base with Charles Sturt University, TAFE NSW, RAAF Base Forest Hill and Kapooka Army Base. All these facilities are vital in building the skills and confidence of all people (including Aboriginal & new immigrants) in the region. The Riverina has a wealth of people with a proactive and entrepreneurial approach to business and life. Opportunities for development exist in the Riverina region in agriculture, agritech and agricultural manufacturing, aged care, defence, manufacturing, wood products, transport & logistics and education.

### **3. Promoting the development of regional centres, cities, towns and districts including promoting master planning of regional communities;**

RDA Riverina has run a program called 'Country Change' [www.countrychange.com.au](http://www.countrychange.com.au) for a number of years. This program was re-invigorated in 2017 due to funding from the NSW Regional Growth – Marketing and Promotion Fund. This funding together with contributions from LGAs paid for a new website, videos and a social media campaign to attract people to the Riverina. Each LGA has data on population, health and education offerings on the site as well as videos telling the story of why each family or individual made the 'Country Change'. RDA Riverina would like to obtain funding to make more videos highlighting migrants' successful stories as well as for more paid social media marketing. Both aspects would add significantly to the Country Change campaign.

The City of Wagga Wagga currently has a plan for growing to 100,000 people in the next 20 years. RDA Riverina believe that this goal is achievable and even necessary in order to support business growth in the region. As well as attracting people to the Riverina through 'Country Change', RDA Riverina will continue to work with others to assist growth through Skilled Migration, Refugee Resettlement and encouraging our youth to stay in the region through programs like Grow Our Own.

Infrastructure planning is necessary in order to be prepared for this growth. The future needs of water, power and other infrastructure should be addressed in all Riverina communities alongside the support for more migration. However, we also see the need to support programs to increase services in health, education and other workforce development. The human need is as great as the infrastructure need.

Housing is an infrastructure need to be further considered in all our growing communities. Wagga Wagga City Council has continued to provide land for housing development. Housing in Wagga and surrounding shires is affordable. The higher end of the market is in Wagga City however there is variables within the LGA. The City of Griffith needs a greater range and provision of accommodation to house workers who are needed for industry in the Western Riverina. Griffith is currently working on plans to alleviate this problem [https://www.griffith.nsw.gov.au/cp\\_themes/default/page.asp?p=DOC-OPG-44-27-00](https://www.griffith.nsw.gov.au/cp_themes/default/page.asp?p=DOC-OPG-44-27-00). Griffith businesses are in desperate need of more employees; however, council is currently concerned about attracting further people from any location because of the shortage of housing. Homelessness is already an issue and could be worse if the housing situation isn't addressed soon. A Griffith City Council media release states that 'Alarming, in Griffith in any given year, there are up to 2,175 homeless people and 2,796 marginally housed people' [https://www.griffith.nsw.gov.au/cp\\_themes/default/page.asp?p=DOC-PTK-74-68-40](https://www.griffith.nsw.gov.au/cp_themes/default/page.asp?p=DOC-PTK-74-68-40). The research also indicated that housing prices are being elevated due to the lack of supply.

### **4. Promoting private investment in regional centres and regional infrastructure;**

All State and Commonwealth Government agencies believe that efforts to attract and relocate job seekers and investors should be driven by the receiving communities themselves. RDA Riverina would like to use its Country Change platform to further promote the Riverina to investors and potential relocators. Currently the NSW Government has identified the Bomen Industrial Estate in Wagga as a Special Activation Precinct and is working to promote this opportunity to investors. We believe this should be a broader but more individual approach. We have been involved in the Lockhart renewable energy project and many other private investment projects

through the region by providing information and data, advising on grant applications and connecting potential partners.

## 5. Examine the key drivers for unlocking decentralisation opportunities for both the private and public sectors;

From RDA Riverina's perspective, our region needs assistance with further promotion so that potential relocators and investors understand the possibilities in our region. Our LGA partners are keen to attract individuals for work, private business investors and the public sector but struggle to promote this. Our platform Country Change has this ability but requires further funding. RIRDIC, renamed as AgriFutures Australia moved to Wagga Wagga three years ago. They promote this as a successful move. There is the potential to move other organisations to the Riverina for cost and community benefit.

RDA Riverina Annual Report 2018-19

### Country Change

The Riverina offers a diverse range of facilities, services and jobs with affordable housing, low congestion and a good work/life balance. Despite these factors, many people in metropolitan Australia are unaware of the opportunities available in regional areas.



In 2018/2019 Country Change continued to expand and build on the reinvigorated format of 2017, marketing the Riverina as a great place to live, work and play. 2018/2019 brought further engagement with industry and linkages with employment opportunities to drive workforce and economic development to the Riverina.

#### Local Government Areas supporting the Country Change campaign in 2018/2019:

• Coolamon Shire Council	• Snowy Valleys Council
• Cootamundra-Gundagai Regional Council	• Temora Shire Council
• Junee Shire Council	• Greater Hume Council
• Lockhart Shire Council	• Griffith City Council
• Leeton Shire Council	• Narrandera Shire Council
• Murrumbidgee Council	

#### Country Change Marketing Campaign

				
Over 1,100,000 separate touch points	779,286 Facebook views	2,400 Facebook fans and followers	158,981 minutes of video viewed	Country Change Expo in Cootamundra

## 6. Promoting the competitive advantages of regional location for businesses;

As noted in Figure 3, The Riverina offers a diverse range of facilities, services and jobs with affordable housing, low congestion and a good work/life balance. Despite these factors, many people in metropolitan Australia are unaware of the opportunities available in regional areas. The Country Change platform and program promotes the competitive advantage of the Riverina region and the specific situation and offering of each of the Riverina's towns. Our platform Jobs Riverina allows employers to advertise jobs in the region at no cost and potential employees to search for jobs and post an air CV. This is of benefit to all.



Figure 4 Median House Prices and Unemployment in the Riverina.  
Jobs Riverina <https://www.jobsriverina.com.au/>

## 7. Examining ways urbanisation can be re-directed to achieve more balanced regional development;

The benefits of launching a business, investing in an existing one or taking up employment in the Riverina include: an affordable lifestyle, much shorter commutes, more free time to spend with the family or socialising, and the ability to enjoy a more active lifestyle. With several airports connecting regional towns with Canberra, Melbourne, Brisbane and Sydney, relocating to the Riverina doesn't mean you're cut off from urban centres either.

There is a great need for workers to fill many vacant positions, involving many skills in demand. Meeting these needs would be a driver to stimulate significant economic activity. Further, it would provide a population base to keep schools and services viable throughout the Riverina. RDA Riverina are supportive and have programs involving promotion of investment opportunities, growing existing Riverina businesses, internal migration or relocation through Country Change, secondary refugee resettlement and skilled migration. We believe that city dwellers do not understand the opportunities that await them in the Riverina. Growing regional centres and assisting in the promotion of these locations can assist in slowing the capital cities unmanageable growth. We believe that promotion of the region through established programs can make a substantial difference.

## 6. Conclusion

The Riverina needs population growth to fill expanding industry needs. RDA Riverina has a multi-faceted approach to workforce development through the Riverina Workforce Development Plan. RDA Riverina is more than willing to further engage in discussions on regional investment and relocation strategies.

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