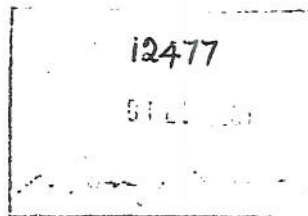




GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

TO THE REPORT BY THE SENATE REFERENCES COMMITTEE ON EMPLOYMENT, WORKPLACE RELATIONS, SMALL BUSINESS AND EDUCATION

***JOBS FOR THE REGIONS: A REPORT ON THE
INQUIRY INTO REGIONAL EMPLOYMENT AND
UNEMPLOYMENT***



FEBRUARY 2001

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Introductory Remarks

The impact of technological change, globalisation, microeconomic reform and the rationalisation of services by the public and private sectors on the employment prospects of Australians living in regional and rural communities varies significantly between regions and depending upon individual circumstances. It is widely recognised that the benefits of economic change do not always flow evenly across Australia and that while many parts of non-metropolitan Australia are charging ahead, others are struggling to meet the challenges posed by globalisation and industry structural change.

The Government has therefore adopted a whole of government approach to working with communities to create an environment that encourages and supports new industries and job opportunities for regional and rural Australia.

To this end, the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Transport and Regional Services, the Hon John Anderson MP, convened the Regional Australia Summit in Canberra from 27 to 29 October 1999.

Two hundred and eighty-two delegates from a range of community, government and business organisations throughout Australia discussed a range of contemporary problems and opportunities in regional Australia. They developed suggestions for community, industry and government actions to create a positive future for regional and rural Australia.

The Summit was divided into twelve themes to look at the challenges that face regional areas of Australia, identify priority areas, and develop possible solutions and partnerships aimed at providing a better future for our regions. The twelve themes were:

- Communications;
- Infrastructure;
- Health;
- Community well being and lifestyle;
- Government – local, state and federal;
- Finance and facilitating entrepreneurship;
- Value-adding to regional communities and farming industries;
- New industries and new opportunities;
- Community and industry leadership;
- Education and training;
- Philanthropy and partnerships; and
- Sustainable resource management.

The priorities identified by each theme group have a direct relationship with the findings and recommendations of the Senate Committee.

Delegates to the Summit also examined and identified the roles that government, business and community sectors could each be expected to fulfil to achieve a better future for regional Australia. In doing this, delegates

clearly identified that meeting the challenges above was a shared responsibility.

A copy of the Summit Communique is at Attachment A.

At the Summit, Mr Anderson established a Steering Committee, chaired by Professor John Chudleigh, former Head of the Orange Agricultural College of the University of Sydney, and comprised of members drawn from Summit delegates. The Steering Committee's role was to advise the Government on implementation strategies to deliver the outcomes from the Summit.

In its interim report, released in April 2000, the Steering Committee recommended the adoption of an aspirational, guiding vision for the future development of regional Australia to have as a national goal:

A strong and resilient regional Australia which, by 2010, has the resources, recognition and skills to play a pivotal role in building Australia's future and is able to turn uncertainty and change into opportunity and prosperity.

The Steering Committee also assessed that there are three strategic areas that require action:

- equity of services in regional communities;
- economic and business development;
- and community empowerment.

In the 2000-2001 Budget the Government announced major new initiatives in each of these three strategic areas. These are outlined in the Budget related Ministerial Statement by the Hon John Anderson MP and Senator the Hon Ian Macdonald entitled *Regional Australia: Making a difference*. (This document is available at www.dotrs.gov.au/budget/regional/index.htm). Details from this statement directly relevant to the Committee's recommendations have been incorporated into this document.

The Steering Committee recently completed its final report having reviewed the Federal Government's response to the Summit's recommendations. Although there is still a long way to go, the Federal Government has acted on many key recommendations in achieving greater equity of services, and in economic and business development and community empowerment.

Among the Federal Government's commitments to date are the \$700 million National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality, the \$562 million Rural Health Initiative, a \$309 million extension of the Agriculture-Advancing Australia package, \$240 million for the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy, a \$90 million Regional Solutions Programme and \$70 million for the Rural Transaction Centre Programme. The \$1.6 billion Roads to Recovery Programme is also a significant step in addressing infrastructure needs.

The report recommends further action in a number of areas and points to the critical role of local government in the future development of regional Australia.

Copies of the report are available at
www.dotrs.gov.au/regional/summit/index.htm

Regional Australia also will be a major beneficiary of the Federal Government's \$2.9 billion *Backing Australia's Ability – An Innovation Action Plan for the Future*, announced by the Prime Minister on 29 January 2001.

Impediments to companies getting started will be removed through the provision of greater access to start up capital funding together with funding for research in regional universities, providing a substantial boost to regional Australia.

The package provides a framework for new opportunities and growth in regional Australia. Specifically the package includes:

- The \$21.7 million New Industries Development Programme (NIDP) targeted at agribusiness and technology in rural Australia. It is one of the key components of the innovation package for regional Australia. NIDP has been expanded from a \$4.6 million three year programme to a \$21.7 million five year programme.

Through the NIDP Australian agribusiness will gain the business skills and resources required to successfully commercialise their business products, technologies and services and thereby generate significant growth in regional Australia.

- \$155 million over five years for Major National Research Facilities with the potential for locating some of these facilities in regional areas.
- Regional universities will be able to access increased research grant funding through the Australian Research Council with a doubling in the funding available by 2006 to \$550 million a year.

Regional universities will also benefit from a total increase in university infrastructure funding of \$337 million over 5 years.

A new \$34.1 million Online Curriculum Content Programme over 5 years will also provide greater access to education for regional Australians.

- As part of the \$35 million National Innovation Awareness Strategy, \$3.7 million will be committed over 4 years towards Questacon's *Smart Moves* programme to raise awareness of science, technology and innovation among secondary students, teachers and communities in regional and rural areas of Australia.

The following responses are offered to the recommendations contained in the Senate Committee's Report.

RECOMMENDATION 1: Local government and state based regional development bodies should be encouraged to become more involved with the operations of ACCs. Regular meetings between these organisations would enable discussions about how prospective proposals could be implemented and how best they can be coordinated between the various organisations to avoid duplicated effort.

Response

The Government accepts this recommendation and has addressed it in its second term of office through the revised framework and clear priorities that have been put in place for Area Consultative Committees (ACCs). The ACCs were established to assist local areas generate employment and require a "private sector" spirit rather than just a public service attitude.

A priority area in the Charter for the National Network of ACCs is working together in partnerships. This requires ACCs to work to maintain constructive alliances with government, business and the community and bring community stakeholders together to identify opportunities, priorities and growth strategies for the region. For example, a proposal is currently being developed for the establishment of an economic development commission for the Indian Ocean Territories which it is anticipated will be associated with Australia's northern ACCs.

Whilst ACCs are not required to have a local government member, in practice, local government representatives are often closely involved with the work of the ACC, and participate either as full or ex-officio members. Many of the projects which have been submitted for funding under the Regional Assistance Program (RAP) are local council initiatives, testifying to the constructive working relationship that is developing between ACCs and local government.

Many ACCs already have well-established links with state based regional development bodies and in accordance with their new Charter, ACCs are enhancing these links. For example, in South Australia, Regional Development Boards and ACCs have held strategic meetings to forge closer and more cooperative links to foster jobs growth, skills development, regional growth and effective service delivery through joint ventures which drive the available funds further. ACCs recognise that cooperating with State regional development bodies maximises their effectiveness and, as such, representatives of State regional development bodies are invited to attend ACC meetings and brief members on relevant programs and initiatives.

Action is underway to further develop and strengthen these relationships. The Department of Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business (DEWRSB) is developing a strategy to improve national awareness of the network of ACCs. A component of this strategy will target local, State and Federal government bodies, along with community groups, chambers of commerce and business organisations. The aim will be to raise awareness of

the role which ACCs play in the community and, through this, foster constructive partnerships between ACCs, relevant tiers of government and the wider community. Rural Transaction Centres (RTC) Field Officers employed by the RTC National Field Officer Network are required to develop and maintain relationships with the ACCs.

An example of local government and state based regional development bodies being more involved in the operations of ACCs is the trial Regional Forum held at Whyalla, South Australia by the Department of Transport and Regional Services in July 1999. A priority identified by the Forum was an improved working relationship between the Flinders Region ACC (FRACC) and the State regional development boards in the Spencer Gulf region. It was agreed that FRACC and the SA Regional Development Association (SARDA) will manage the follow up to the Forum as part of a seven point plan agreed to by DEWRSB, FRACC and SARDA. This plan specified that the ACCs and Regional Development Boards individually and collectively should seek to maximise outcomes in relation to fostering opportunities for jobs growth, skills development and regional growth, and service delivery by joint ventures which drive available funds further.

Overall strategies for implementation include:

- explore the notion of developing protocols in relation to how the parties will work together;
- explore the concept of integrating relevant elements of the respective organisations' strategic plans;
- encourage State Government to recognise the role of ACCs in achieving common objectives – recognising in the first instance that the Commonwealth should establish dialogue and agreement with the relevant State Government agencies; and
- in conjunction with ACCs facilitate regular joint meetings to discuss matters of concern in the pursuit of mutual objectives.

RECOMMENDATION 2: That the Commonwealth Government take a coordinating role in the dissemination of information to local businesses of the range of assistance measures available to them. This information should be made available through a wide variety of mediums such as ACCs, websites, the ATO and regional services centres operated by State and Commonwealth government (sic).

Response

This recommendation is supported in principle. Action is already under way in several Commonwealth portfolios to address this recommendation.

CURRENT SITUATION

Information to regional businesses is currently disseminated in a variety of ways. The Commonwealth's activity in this area is primarily through two programs: the Business Entry Point (DEWRSB) and the National Business Information Service (NBIS).

Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business

The Business Entry Point (BEP) www.business.gov.au is the key online channel for the Commonwealth in interacting with business. The web site is managed by the Department of Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business.. It is designed as a single entry point to government through the Internet. The BEP, as the key online access point to the Australian Business Register (ABR), provides the online registration point for all businesses to register for an Australian Business Number and the Goods and Services Tax (GST). In May 2000, the BEP launched a lookup and browse facility to the ABR which will assist all businesses in the implementation of the Government's tax reform initiatives. The NBIS provides access for BEP users to the business information resources of the three levels of government.

The BEP offers a secure, reliable and private environment for businesses to complete online transactions and registrations with the Australian Taxation Office and with other government agencies.

The BEP demonstrates the Government's commitment to improving services to small businesses and reducing the costs of compliance. ACCs are also actively promoting the BEP to small businesses in their region.

Industry, Science and Resources

The National Business Information Service (NBIS) is managed by AusIndustry, a business unit within ISR.

The Business Information Service (NBIS) arose out of the Prime Minister's More Time For Business statement in 1997. The objectives of the NBIS are:

- to reduce the compliance burden that business faces in accessing government information; and
- to integrate business information from all three levels of government into a comprehensive national information service.

Through NBIS the Commonwealth provides national leadership in integrating business information services, the adoption of common standards, and national co-operation to continue to develop and enhance business information services for all businesses.

The NBIS draws together the business information resources of the three levels of government (Commonwealth, State, Territory and Local) and distributes this national data set to all key government business entry points. Through NBIS all businesses, irrespective of location, and their advisers now have access to comprehensive information about the wide range of government information and services for the first time.

The NBIS is a package of services/initiatives which enable business to easily locate all the relevant information it needs to start and run a business (including information about business licensing and assistance programs).

The main elements of the package are:

- Web-based software to assist business to collect information;
- A telephone hotline (13 28 46) to answer business queries and provide guidance;
- An internet based facility which automatically collects and disseminates information electronically from all levels of government and industry associations;
- A CD-ROM containing a sub-set of the national collection of information for business without net access;
- A national electronic collection of industry licensing requirements and codes of practice.

The NBIS contains information on over 40,000 business resources and is expected to grow to cover over 1 million resources.

NBIS gives quick and easy access to business licensing, other information and assistance program resources from all three levels of government from the single entry point of their choice. Importantly, access for regional businesses is the same as metropolitan businesses – NBIS is available online, over the phone, through government shopfronts and offline as a CD ROM.

Invest Australia, within the Department of Industry, Science and Resources (ISR), is working with Commonwealth, State, regional and local agencies to ensure that regional Australia has effective access to ISR services and programs, and that ISR information services incorporate regional information.

A regional focus is also being developed on the *Invest Australia* Website (www.investaustralia.gov.au) which will be one of the means by which *Invest Australia* ensures regional Australia has effective access to ISR programs and services. These programs and services can also be found through the BEP website.

Foreign Affairs and Trade

Austrade provides a wide range of services and assistance to businesses in regional Australia, including advice on how to get into exporting, information on overseas markets and opportunities, and grants for export marketing. Information about those services and assistance is delivered through:

- a network of Austrade, TradeStart and Export Access offices across regional Australia, including Darwin, Alice Springs, Cairns, Rockhampton, Bundaberg, Toowoomba, Townsville, Southport, Coffs Harbour, Tamworth, Newcastle, Gosford, Bathurst, Wollongong, Nowra, Wagga Wagga, Wangaratta, Ballarat, Bendigo, Launceston, Berri, Mount Gambier, Whyalla, Albany, Geraldton, Carnarvon and Kununurra;
- a telephone advisory service for the cost of a local call from anywhere in Australia (Tel – 132878);
- the Austrade Online website (www.austrade.gov.au);
- an ongoing public awareness campaign (advertisements, media releases) to raise community awareness and understanding of the economic and social benefits of trade and exports, and of Austrade's role as Australia's major export and investment facilitation agency;
- participation in regional field days and agricultural shows including most recently Dowerin (W.A.), Albany (W.A.), Orange (NSW), Waikerie (S.A.) and Launceston (Tas);
- a continuous program of seminars providing information on opportunities overseas and assistance available from Austrade, for exporters and potential exporters. For example Live Cattle Seminars (opportunities in China and Vietnam) have been held in Cloncurry, Townsville and Kununurra, and E-Commerce for Exporting Workshops have been held in Mooloolaba, Tamworth, Newcastle, Armidale and Dubbo; and
- a continuous program of client visits (including to regional Australia) by Trade Commissioners and overseas engaged marketing staff.

The \$150m per annum Export Market Development Grants (EMDG) scheme encourages small and medium sized businesses to export by reimbursing up to 50% of eligible export marketing expenses. In 1999/00, \$25m in EMDG grants were paid to 636 rural and regional Australian businesses. These businesses generated around \$1 billion in exports and represent 22% of all export grants paid in 1999/00.

Family and Community Services

The Prime Minister's Community Business Partnership aims to develop and promote a culture of community/business collaboration in Australia. A key focus in developing the communication strategy is building the business case

and identifying the reciprocal benefits to both the business and community sectors. The Partnership also hosts the Prime Minister's Awards for Excellence in Community Business Partnerships which creates huge national media attention and involves a member of Council of Small Business of Australia on the judging panel.

Department of Transport and Regional Services

The Department of Transport and Regional Services has several initiatives that aim to take a whole of government approach to the dissemination of information to rural and regional Australians.

Countrylink Australia is the Federal Government's information access service for country people. This program provides people living outside of the capital cities with information about Federal Government programs and services, and up-to-date information about their entitlements and obligations.

Countrylink Australia offers five major services:

- a 1800 Telephone Information Line (calls are free);
- dissemination of publications;
- the *Countrylink Australia* Shopfront which visits regional shows and field days;
- *Countrylink Australia* Community Information Stands, located with regional community groups as a local source of information; and
- the *Countrylink Australia* Video Lending Library which lends, free of charge, videos covering a wide variety of topics of interest to people in regional and remote areas.

As part of the Department's whole of government approach, three publications have been distributed to all Federal Senators and Members of Parliament, all local councils and any individuals, groups or organisations who have requested them through Countrylink. They are

- *The User's Guide* - designed to provide regional Australians with a brief snapshot of Government services highlighting contact details for further information;
- *The Rural Book* - a complete handbook of programs and services across Federal Government for rural communities and interest groups; and
- *Commonwealth Assistance for Local Projects (CALP)* - designed as a directory of Federal Government programs and funding opportunities relevant to local government and their communities.

Centrelink

As the Commonwealth's 'one stop shop' for individuals in rural and regional Australia, Centrelink has the available infrastructure and already undertakes the dissemination of information about a wide range of assistance and services. Centrelink managers and staff play a lead role in providing information and promoting access to programs, funding and services (for

example *Networking the Nation*, *Rural Transaction Centres*, and state based funding for small business).

Centrelink has also developed arrangements with local/State government and community based organisations in response to community service delivery needs. In particular the Government Information Centre, a joint Centrelink/State Government initiative being piloted in Tasmania, provides a single access point to information about Government services. Links with other State Government entry points are also being explored to enable a seamless government information service, which will be made available on-line to assist customers.

Centrelink Customer Service Centres, through Job Network Access Centres, provide job search facilities to all job seekers free of charge. 166 of these Centres are located in regional and rural areas.

Rural Transaction Centres

Under the Rural Transactions Centres program, funds have been made available to help small communities establish their own centres providing access to basic transaction services such as banking, postal services, Medicare easy-claim facilities, and phone and fax services.

Rural communities with populations up to 3,000 are eligible for assistance, however the program is open to other towns that have a strong case for assistance. Any non-profit organisation representing a community group can apply for funding under the Rural Transactions Centres program. Potential applicants include local government councils, community groups and Chambers of Commerce.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

During the Regional Australia Summit strong concern was expressed over the lack of a coordinated approach across government to the delivery of government services and programs. A key element of this issue is the availability of information to enable rural and regional Australians to access government services and programs. The Commonwealth recognises that there needs to be a consistent and comprehensive collection and dissemination of information and programs. As part of the outcome from the Summit, whole-of-government approaches are being pursued in many areas, including online and communications activities targeted at regional Australia.

At a meeting of Regional Development Ministers and the Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) held on 29 March 2000, a taskforce was established to work through a number of issues including identifying immediate and concrete opportunities.

At the 3 November 2000 meeting of the Regional Development Ministers and the ALGA, the taskforce reported on a framework for future regional cooperation between the three spheres of government in Australia. The

Ministers and the ALGA endorsed the report. The Communique from this meeting is at Attachment B.

The taskforce is currently considering the scope for cooperative approaches on a number of issues including zone rebates, business investment, retention of professionals in regional areas , housing and infrastructure. The taskforce will report to Ministers and the ALGA on progress on these issues.

RECOMMENDATION 3: That the Commonwealth investigate strategies for attracting increased investment to regional Australia.

Response

The Government agrees there is a need to attract greater investment to regional and rural Australia. To this end a number of strategies and initiatives have been, and will continue to be, pursued.

Invest Australia, within ISR, is working to ensure that regional Australia has the same service quality in investment attraction and facilitation as the rest of Australia. In addition, *Invest Australia* activities are directed towards improving and increasing investment opportunities in regional Australia.

In 1999-2000 *Invest Australia* attracted a total of 72 new investment projects into Australia. Of these, 16 projects, or one in five, are located in rural and regional Australia. This has the potential to result in \$923 million of new investment and the creation of up to 2085 new jobs.

To assist new investment in regional Australia, a Regional Australia Investment Strategies team was established within *Invest Australia* in March 1999. In partnership with State and Territory agencies, the team works with communities to develop mechanisms aimed at encouraging institutional investors, venture capitalists and/or project financiers to invest in regional Australia by providing specific regional investment assistance.

Recently, *Invest Australia* prepared its first regional investment strategy focussed on the Upper Spencer Gulf region of South Australia. As a six month pilot project, *Invest Australia* worked with Invest South Australia, regional organisations, businesses and the community to identify possible areas which could form the basis of an investment strategy as a component of the region's overall economic development plan. The information was compiled and presented as an investment strategy titled 'Making A Case: Investment Potential in the Upper Spencer Gulf, South Australia'. The strategy was launched by the Minister for Industry, Science and Resources in Port Augusta on 9 June 2000.

With the experience gained from the Upper Spencer Gulf project, *Invest Australia*, in cooperation with State and Territory investment agencies, is preparing an instructive manual to assist communities prepare a framework for their own investment strategies. The instructive manual titled 'A Do It Yourself Guide to Regional Investment Attraction' will describe the theory, processes and tools necessary for individual communities to collect the 'building blocks' required for an investment strategy as part of their overall economic development plan. Following the preparation and piloting of the draft manual, the guide is expected to be launched in June 2001.

The Government acknowledges that in some circumstances there may be a need for specific incentives to be provided to secure strategic investments for Australia. Such incentives include grants, tax relief (taking into account

Constitutional constraints) or the provision of infrastructure services. The Strategic Investment Coordinator considers proposals for investment incentives on a case-by-case basis in accordance with eligibility criteria. The Coordinator is responsible for advising Cabinet through the Prime Minister about strategic projects that may warrant the provision of incentives.

Austrade, through its overseas network and Australian operations, works in partnership with *Invest Australia* to increase productive and sustainable investment in Australia. Through this cooperation, Austrade was involved (in 1999-00) in attracting 16 projects to regional Australia, worth a total of \$921.2 million, generating 2,035 jobs and \$635 million in exports.

In the Territory of Christmas Island the Commonwealth is currently facilitating the establishment by Asia Pacific Space Centre of a satellite launching facility. This \$500 million commercial project has the potential to provide significant economic benefits for this isolated island and for Australia generally.

RECOMMENDATION 4: Governments of all levels place a higher priority on the provision of adequate infrastructure in regional Australia. This includes telecommunications, transport, gas, electricity, water, sewerage, renewable energy and gas pipeline infrastructure.

Response

Infrastructure is an essential determinant in a nation achieving a sustainable level of economic growth and development. Communications, transport and water and energy supply in particular, impact upon the ability of an economy to grow. The Government recognises the role of infrastructure in regional Australia. Poor infrastructure impedes the efficiency with which businesses are able to operate and limits further investment and employment growth. In the Indian Ocean Territories of Christmas Island and the Cocos (Keeling) Islands the Commonwealth has funded a \$120 million program of public infrastructure upgrading since 1992.

The public sector has generally been the main provider of infrastructure in order to: prevent market failure (such as the private sector exploitation of a natural monopoly); provide public goods; and ensure equity in the provision of services. However, the cost of many new infrastructure projects is such that the public sector cannot afford to build them without absorbing significant debt, reducing essential services, or increasing taxes and charges. The private sector, on the other hand, is likely to only participate in infrastructure projects that meet commercial objectives.

Generally, the role of the public sector will be to provide infrastructure that has significant public benefits and can be justified in terms of a government's overall objectives. Roads in regional areas are one such example. Competitive tendering and contracting in such circumstances, however, provides some scope for private sector participation. This will allow governments to concentrate on the provision of goods and services that have equity considerations whilst attaining the technical and allocative efficiencies that are offered by private sector provision. There is greater scope for examining alternative models such as public-private partnerships as a means for regional infrastructure provision.

The private sector has begun to meet the shift from public investment, however it has been quite selective, operating in areas that achieve significant financial return such as toll roads and water sewerage schemes that have consistent revenue streams through "user pays".

In relation to the tax treatment of infrastructure projects, the Government in November 1999 announced in principle support for the recommendations of the Review of Business Taxation to abolish section 51AD and to replace Division 16D of the Income Tax Assessment Act. These provisions deny deductions, in some cases, to private sector infrastructure projects where the project is 'effectively controlled' by tax exempt organisations. The

Government is currently consulting with State Governments and the private sector in relation to these recommendations. In making final decisions in relation to the recommendations, the Government will clarify the tax treatment to ensure appropriate policy arrangements for private investment in infrastructure.

Telecommunications Infrastructure

The Federal Government has contributed significant funds from both tranches of the sale of Telstra to support communications development in regional Australia. The principal vehicle for the allocation of this support is the Networking the Nation (NTN) program (the Regional Telecommunications Infrastructure Fund), which was established under the first partial sale, to provide \$250 million over five years. Projects have addressed an array of community needs and reflect the diversity in telecommunications priorities in each State, Territory and region. Projects range from the provision of enhanced internet access, improved telecommunications infrastructure, video-conferencing facilities, e-commerce and demand aggregation, through to community planning projects. The NTN Board has also approved several pilot projects to trial alternative means of service delivery and to trial the use of innovative technologies for delivering telecommunications services.

An additional \$670 million was made available from the \$1 billion *Accessing the Future* package of Social Bonus programs funded by the second partial sale of Telstra. This additional funding, some of which will be administered by the NTN program, is for a variety of specific purposes including enhancing telecommunications infrastructure and access in rural and regional areas:

- \$150 million to facilitate untime local calls within extended zones in remote Australia
- \$120 million to enhance access to TV reception
- \$70 million to build additional rural networks
- \$45 million to assist local government authorities provide online access to information and services including the Internet
- \$36 million to stimulate Internet service delivery
- \$25 million for continuous mobile phone coverage along designated highways
- \$20 million to improve telecommunications access for remote islands communities
- \$15 million towards establishing local area and wide area networks linking Tasmanian schools
- \$15 million for a broadband project in Tasmania
- \$10 million for trials in the delivery of innovative government electronic regional services
- \$3 million to expand mobile phone coverage in regional centres in South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania
- \$158 million to promote the growth of new and innovative Australian IT&T businesses
- \$3 million to promote a safer Internet environment for young people

The 2000-01 Budget contains initiatives to ensure that Australia's telecommunications and broadcasting sectors continue to take up the opportunities offered by new technologies, to create new employment, educational, social and entertainment opportunities for all Australians - regardless of where they live.

The Budget announced an extensive program of support for regional commercial television stations to assist them in meeting the costs of rolling out digital television in non-metropolitan areas. Up to \$260 million will be spent over 13 years, including \$22.6 million in 2000-01.

The Budget also announced a \$10 million Regional Communications Partnership with the new owner of the National Transmission Network to assist community-based self-help retransmission groups obtain access to network sites in regional and remote areas by subsidising the commercial fees payable. These groups then retransmit commercial and national television and radio services to smaller communities that would not otherwise have had access. The Federal Government and the new owner of the Network are each contributing \$5 million.

Transport Infrastructure

A network of national roads connecting 'inland ports', railheads and rural manufacturing centres with cities and coastal ports – and the efficient operation of heavy transport vehicles between them – is the centrepiece of the Federal Government's land transport strategy. This strategy recognises that the community is seeking transport efficiency as an essential part of the process of structural adjustment, improved productivity and resource allocation across the national economy. As well as freight networks, the strategy reinforces the importance of roads to tourism and modern lifestyles that demand a high degree of mobility.

The total budget allocation for roads for 2000-01 is more than \$1.3 billion, \$858.9 million of this involving direct spending by the Federal Government. In recognition of the importance of transport infrastructure to regional and rural Australia, 90 per cent of the Government's direct spending on roads in 2000-01 will be allocated to non-urban roads. A further \$406.4 million will be provided to local government throughout Australia for local roads, and \$41 million has been allocated towards the Road Safety Black Spot Program.

Commonwealth roads funding has concentrated on a defined National Highway System, which includes a number of key urban links, and Roads of National Importance. (See Recommendation 5 for further details of these programs). The States are responsible for the rest of the arterial network. Local government plays a vital role in the provision of transport infrastructure and is responsible for more than 80 per cent by length of the nation's roads. Roads represent the major capital investment of most councils. Recently the Federal Government announced a \$1.2 billion boost over four years in its funding for local roads through the new *Roads to Recovery* Programme.

The Government is providing \$7 million for the upgrade of Rockhampton Airport. This upgrade includes a runway extension and will enable the airport to handle heavily laden Boeing 767 and some Boeing 747 aircraft. It will position Rockhampton as the main staging point for international military exercises conducted at Shoalwater Bay and is expected to create almost 400 extra jobs in the region, contributing up to \$40 million to the regional economy.

The Commonwealth is currently the major shareholder in National Rail Corporation, but is working with other shareholders towards progressing its sale. After the sale, the Commonwealth's only equity involvement in the rail industry will be through the Australian Rail Track Corporation which provides access to interstate rail track.

Commonwealth rail initiatives that have a regional focus are:

- **Abt Railway Project in Tasmania:** The Commonwealth has allocated \$20.45m from the Centenary of Federation Fund to restore the original Abt Railway between Queenstown and Strahan on Tasmania's West Coast.
- **Alice Springs to Darwin Railway:** The Commonwealth has allocated a total of \$165m towards the project and has provided a long-term peppercorn lease of the Tarcoola to Alice Springs line, which has a written down replacement value of some \$400m. \$100m is from the Centenary of Federation Fund and \$65m from separate funding announced in October 1999 by the Prime Minister.
- **Infrastructure Upgrading Program in Tasmania:** the Commonwealth has allocated \$5m to upgrade rail infrastructure in Tasmania. The appropriation was \$2m in 1997/98 and then \$1m per annum in the following three years.
- **\$250m Rail Investment Program:** The Commonwealth has allocated \$250 million for capital expenditure on the mainline track over four years commencing in 1998/99. A significant portion of the funds will be spent on upgrading the interstate track in regional areas.

The Commonwealth's involvement in the maritime industry consists of policy, safety environmental regulation and accident investigation. It has no operational involvement.

Gas and Gas Pipeline Infrastructure

The Government contends that gas pipeline infrastructure can be best provided by private sector investment. Through its gas industry reforms, the Government has established a national regulatory regime for third party access to natural gas pipelines, which is expected to provide greater certainty for investment in pipelines and opportunities to both link and expand the pipeline network. This will result in greater competition in the supply of natural gas and lower gas prices for gas consumers, thereby improving the competitiveness of Australian industry.

As a result of the establishment of competition policy reforms, a number of new gas pipelines are already bringing benefits to various regional areas, such as the central west of NSW, the Murray Valley and Riverland area of South Australia. A number of additional pipelines, including extensions of existing pipelines, are proposed or already under construction which will also bring gas to rural and regional areas. These include: the Eastern Gas Pipeline from Longford to Sydney; the Papua New Guinea to Queensland pipeline; the Central Ranges pipeline in central western NSW from Dubbo to Tamworth; the Wide Bay gas project in Queensland; and the Longford to Tasmania pipeline. Feasibility studies have also been announced for new pipeline projects from the Timor Sea to Townsville and from Onslow to Geraldton.

The expansion of the gas pipeline network is resulting in the introduction of cheaper energy into regions and is contributing to new job creating industries that may not otherwise have been feasible. Existing industries, too, have been able to secure a competitive future by switching from using more expensive fuels to cheaper natural gas.

Electricity Infrastructure

Reform of the structure and regulation of the electricity supply industry aims to promote competition in this \$60 billion industry, in order to deliver lower electricity costs, more efficient and sustainable use of capital and energy resources, and to improve Australia's domestic and international economic performance.

The National Electricity Market (NEM) reforms have increased efficiency in the electricity industry by introducing competition into the generation sector, increasingly to the retail sector and indirectly into network operations. As a result of the reforms future resource allocation and infrastructure investment decisions will be determined more by the interaction of supply and demand.

Economic benefits will flow because competition will open up opportunities for new technology (such as combined cycle gas, solar, etc) and growth in demand will assist the process of new entry. The network access provisions open up opportunities for smaller scale generators to site themselves close to major industrial customers, reducing potential network augmentation costs and the cost of electricity transmission losses to customers.

Competition is also placing increased pressure on utilities to reduce costs, align tariffs/prices with costs, and use their assets more efficiently.

Furthermore the NEM has enabled the market operator (NEMMCO) to reduce reserve plant margins by the sharing of plants between States and to provide better capacity utilisation of generation assets. In an integrated national market, regions with access to lower cost fuels can provide cheaper energy to other regions.

At the retail level it is intended that, from 2001, retail contestability will be introduced for electricity users in NEM participating jurisdictions so retail customers will be able to choose their electricity supplier. Thus, there is an incentive for retail innovation to meet customer needs, such as tailored tariff structures, and energy packages covering electricity, gas and energy efficient appliances.

The needs of smaller consumers and rural and regional areas are recognised. The reform process will be monitored closely to ensure that the distribution of these benefits is not just one of the unintended or delayed side-effects of these reforms, but rather a central plank in the delivery of competitive market outcomes outside metropolitan Australia.

Many country locations also have potential to exploit the renewable electricity generation opportunities arising from the Prime Minister's November 1997 Statement "Safeguarding the future: Australia's response to climate change". Rural and regional areas will increasingly be able to use technology to break the tyranny of distance and to explore new opportunities for rural and economic development. The Commonwealth has committed \$10 million worth of investment to showcase renewable energy projects.

The Commonwealth places a high priority on ensuring that all Australians can share fairly in the benefits of the electricity industry reforms at an early date. Governments have an important role to ensure that the benefits of the market reforms are distributed throughout the community.

Since the establishment of the competitive National Electricity Market there has been significant interest from the private sector in investment in the electricity industry, with a wide range of proposals currently being considered or approved for construction. These include both new network connections and new generation proposals.

Renewable Energy Infrastructure

Regional areas are key producers of biomass feedstocks such as plantation and food industry by products, and have large resources of wind, small hydro, wave and solar energy. In the emerging sustainable technology environment there are significant opportunities for employment to be realised in regional areas.

Parliament has recently passed legislation (8 December 2000) that sets a target for an additional 9,500 GWh of electricity to be generated from renewable energy sources by 2010. The regulations that operate under this legislation have recently been through a public comment period. The measure will commence on 1 April 2001. It is anticipated that this initiative will provide considerable stimulus to the development of renewable energy technologies. Recent studies of possible options to meet this target have indicated that biomass to energy technologies often represent the most cost effective way of achieving the target.

The Renewable Energy Action Agenda is being implemented by industry in partnership with the Department of Industry, Science and Resources, the Australian Greenhouse Office and other relevant government agencies. The Action Agenda provides a ten year strategy to achieve a sustainable and internationally competitive renewable energy industry in Australia through market development, building community commitment, building industry capability, setting the policy framework and encouraging a culture of innovation.

Renewable energy is often a viable alternative to diesel-generated electricity in those areas of Australia not serviced by a main electricity grid. The Renewable Remote Power Generation Program (RRPGP) will provide support the uptake of renewable technologies including assistance for conversion of diesel based electricity supplies to renewable energy technologies.

The program, which has funds available from 1 July 2000, will provide a rebate for the installation of renewable remote area power supplies. Potentially eligible installations are those where renewable energy replaces diesel for all or part of the energy source for off-grid electricity generation.

The Renewable Energy Equity Fund (REEF) is facilitating the commercialisation and application of renewable energy technologies through the provision of equity funds. Government funding is provided and invested along with private sector funding on a 2:1 basis. REEF is administered by the Industry Research and Development Board on behalf of the Australian Greenhouse Office. Many of these programs are being supported for implementation in regional areas.

In November 1999, the Government launched an internet site, <http://www.renewable.greenhouse.gov.au>, dedicated to the Australian renewable energy industry. Information on many technologies appropriate for use in regional areas is contained on this site.

RECOMMENDATION 5: That road funding formulae be re-examined with a view to placing a higher priority on regional development.

Response

Regional development considerations are included in funding decisions for the Federal Government roads program.

The government delivers its roads programs through funding the National Highway, Roads of National Importance and the recently announced major new initiative to assist with the repair and maintenance of vital local roads. This *Roads to Recovery* programme will run over four years with total funding of \$1.2 billion of which \$850 million will be spent in rural and regional areas, in recognition of the fact that this is where the need is greatest.

Under the National Highway and Roads of National Importance programme the Federal Government will spend in 2000-01, around \$740 million on projects in regional areas. This is around 90 per cent of the available funding. The benefits in travel time savings, vehicle operating cost savings, greater safety and other intangible benefits of improvement to the National Highway accrue to the regions and communities served by it.

The Commonwealth has strategies for each corridor against which it assesses its investment in the National Highway. Those strategies include improving access for the regions and communities along the corridor and, where applicable, the need for improvements to facilitate the movement of freight on the corridor. Projects under the National Highway program are assessed initially according to their economic benefit as measured by their benefit-cost ratio. The Minister decides which projects are to be funded taking into consideration other Commonwealth objectives for the National Highway, including regional development.

Similarly, the key Roads of National Importance, which the Federal Government funds in cooperation with the States and Territories, are important links for regional Australia. Roads of National Importance receiving large Federal Government funding contributions include the Pacific Highway, the Calder Highway, Geelong Road and the Great Western Highway.

Under the new *Roads to Recovery* Programme, each local government will receive a specified amount of funding and has discretion over expenditure, although it must be spent on roads. The 4-year *Roads to Recovery* Programme represents the largest ever injection of extra funds into local roads by any Australian Federal Government.

In 2000-01 the Federal Government will provide around \$1.322 billion in financial assistance grants to Local Government. This comprises a general purpose grant of \$915 million and a local road grant of \$406 million. Financial assistance grants are untied in the hands of Local Government and are used to address a range of local government expenditure priorities including local

roads. Local Government Grants Commissions, established under legislation in each State and the Northern Territory, determine individual council allocations in accordance with agreed National Principles. For local roads funding, the National Principles state that the grants should be allocated to local governments as far as practicable on the basis of the relative needs of each local governing body for roads expenditure and to preserve its road assets.

For general purpose grants the National Principles provide additional criteria to the objectives of horizontal fiscal equalisation and the minimum grant to local governments which are established in the *Local Government (Financial Assistance) Act 1995*. Horizontal equalisation is achieved if each local government in a State is able to provide the average range, level and quality of services by reasonable effort, taking account of differences in their capacities to raise revenue and differences in the expenditure to provide average services. This means that local governments that would incur higher costs in providing normal services, for example, in remote areas where transport costs are higher, will receive additional grant monies.

The Commonwealth Grants Commission (the Commission) is undertaking a review of the *Local Government (Financial Assistance) Act 1995*. The Commission has released its discussion paper for the review and has called for written submissions. The Commission has completed its programme of hearings in each capital city and has also visited a number of regional centres. The Commission will release a draft report in January 2001 and a final report in June 2001. The Commission will hold a conference in Canberra in March 2001 to discuss the draft report. The Review is an important part of the Government's desire to enhance equity between councils while ensuring certainty of funding. Further details on the review including the terms of reference are available on the Commission's website at www.cgc.gov.au.

RECOMMENDATION 6: That the government be more vigilant in the interests of remote populations in their access to telecommunications facilities, which should be viewed not simply as a commercial issue but as a civic entitlement guaranteed by the state.

Note: Government Senators do not agree with this recommendation

Response

The Federal Government has enacted legislation (the universal service regime) to ensure that all people in Australia, wherever they reside or conduct business, have reasonable access, on an equitable basis, to standard telephone services, pay phones and digital data services. Provision has been made for additional carrier services to be prescribed. The underlying principle of the universal service regime is that all citizens should have access to services considered essential or highly desirable for participation in contemporary society and the emerging information economy. The current universal service arrangements are set out in Part 2 of the *Telecommunications (Consumer Protection and Service Standards) Act 1999*. Telstra is currently the primary universal service provider.

Universal service obligation (USO) arrangements are essentially targeted at support for high-cost rural and remote areas of Australia. Standard telephone services provided are price-controlled, and in high-cost areas the universal service provider cannot always recover the full cost of providing services from the customer. The losses incurred by universal service providers resulting from the supply of loss-making services in the course of fulfilling the USO are shared amongst all participating telecommunications carriers.

Digital data services were added to the universal service regime in October 1999, thereby giving all Australians the possibility of wider participation in the emerging information economy. Under the *General Digital Data Service*, Telstra is required to provide, on demand, to at least 96 per cent of the population a two-way data transmission service, broadly comparable to 64 kilobits per second (kbps). The remaining 4 per cent of the population who are unable to access standard ISDN services – primarily those in regional, rural and remote areas – are able to access a 64 kbps one-way digital data service (usually provided by satellite) under the *Special Digital Data Service* (also provided by Telstra). The Federal Government has also introduced a rebate scheme to allow consumers of the *Special Digital Data Service* to be reimbursed up to \$765 for equipment necessary to access this new service. From 1 July 2000, it has been easier for other telecommunications providers to become general or special digital data service providers.

The Federal Government is committed to ensuring that the universal service regime is robust and sustainable into the future. With this in mind the Government will shortly finalise a new legislative framework for the USO. The

new framework will improve the reliability of USO delivery, enhance industry certainty, widen the funding base and better support the competitive provision of USO services. The Government is conducting a tender for the provision of untimed local calls in remote Australia, with the successful tenderer becoming the universal service provider for that area for a three year period. The Government is also well advanced in implementing two pilot schemes for competitive multi-provider delivery of the USO in regional areas.

Additionally, there are a number of separate arrangements for low-income earners and people with a disability. These include the National Relay Service, which extends telephony access to the hearing impaired. The Federal Government has also contributed significant funds from both tranches of the sale of Telstra to support communications developments in regional Australia (see information under Recommendation 4).

The Rural Transaction Centres program is assisting remote populations in their access to telecommunications by providing funding for access to internet facilities and training, video conferencing and public telephone and facsimile services.

RECOMMENDATION 7: That the remaining one third (sic) of Telstra not be privatised.

Note: Government Senators do not agree with this recommendation.

Response

The Government's policy is that Telstra should be transferred to full private ownership, but within an effective regulatory framework that protects consumers and promotes competition. As Telstra is a Corporations Law company with private shareholders, Government ownership is not an appropriate or effective mechanism for advancing consumer, competition or community interests.

In accordance with its election policy, the Government established an independent inquiry to assess the adequacy of Telstra's service levels to customers in metropolitan, regional, rural and remote areas. The Inquiry concluded that Australians generally have adequate access to a range of high quality, basic and advanced telecommunication services, although a significant proportion of those who live and work in rural and remote Australia have concerns about some key aspects of the telecommunications services available to them. The Government has announced that it is committed to a plan of action to address these concerns. The Government will not introduce legislation to sell the Commonwealth's remaining shareholding in Telstra until its plan of action has been fully considered and made public.

The full privatisation of Telstra will not change the telecommunications regulatory framework that exists in Australia today. Changes in Telstra's ownership status will not affect the Government's ability to protect the interests of consumers, competitors and the public generally, and further foster industry development.

Through legislated arrangements, such as the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman, the Customer Service Guarantee and the Universal Service Obligation, the Government can ensure consumers receive a minimum standard of service irrespective of the ownership of Telstra.

RECOMMENDATION 8: That the funding for programs that were cashed out, such as fares assistance, relocation assistance and formal training allowance be reinstated as guaranteed allowances on top of the money allocated for job search assistance.

Note: Government Senators do not agree with this recommendation.

Response

The Government does not believe that reinstating funding for programs that were cashed out with the introduction of Job Network, such as guaranteed allowances on top of the money allocated for Job Search assistance, would be either appropriate or useful for job seekers.

The Government had good reasons for cashing out these programs in the first instance. The rationale for introducing Job Network was that the previous labour market assistance arrangements which were administered by the Commonwealth Employment Service (CES), were not effective at getting people into jobs. Job seekers were expected to fit labour market program arrangements and there was insufficient focus on achieving real job outcomes. To return to such a rigid program structure would be a retrograde step as it would remove the flexibility and incentives built into Job Network.

One of the major strengths of Job Network is its flexibility. For example, job seekers who are most in need are eligible for Intensive Assistance services. These job seekers have the flexibility to decide with their Job Network member the best form of assistance to get them a job. This may mean that the Job Network member will use their fees to provide the job seeker with job search training, relocation assistance, vocational training, language and literacy training, or other assistance such as work place adjustments. Job Network members who provide Job Search Training or Job Matching can also use their funds to provide assistance with fares if they believe it will assist the job seeker in getting a job. Job Network is discussed further in Recommendation 9.

A range of other Government programs complement the services provided by Job Network in regional Australia. In addition to the Regional Assistance Program, the Government has introduced Work for the Dole and a variety of measures under the mutual obligation suite. The Return to Work program and the new Indigenous Employment Strategy also provide assistance to disadvantaged job seekers in regional Australia.

RECOMMENDATION 9: That the NEIS program should be expanded and further investigation be made into the effects of unbridled competition in the provision of employment services.

Note: Government Senators do not agree with this recommendation.

Response

New Enterprise Incentive Scheme

The Government increased the number of places available in the New Enterprise Incentive Scheme (NEIS) prior to the release of the Senate Report. In the second contract period of Job Network, there will be about 6,810 NEIS places available annually, compared with approximately 6,710 places in the first period of Job Network (in annual terms).

The effects of competition in the provision of employment services

The Government has also noted the view of the Committee that further investigation be undertaken into the effects of unbridled (or alternatively, unrestrained) competition in the provision of employment services.

The Government does not agree with the contention that unbridled competition has been introduced into the provision of employment services in Australia. What has occurred through the introduction of Job Network is the introduction of a fully competitive framework for the delivery of active labour market policies in Australia. The primary objective of these reforms is to ensure that labour market assistance has a clear focus on job outcomes. The decision to adopt these reforms was based on a conviction that, over time, a contestable framework for the delivery of employment services would increase the choices available to job seekers. It will also raise the quality of services that they receive, lead to better and more lasting employment outcomes, and boost value for money from the expenditure of public funds.

It is clear that Job Network, which provides assistance to job seekers depending on their level of need, is a much more effective system for enabling job seekers to access employment opportunities than the previous arrangements administered by the CES. For example, in the 12 months to end November 2000, Job Network had placed an average of about 5,700 unemployed people in jobs per week. There were more than 294,000 eligible job placements under Job Network in the year to end November 2000.

In the year ending November 2000 more than 62,000 job seekers commenced Job Search Training. In the same period, almost 319,000 job seekers commenced in Intensive Assistance.

Current Post Program Monitoring estimates show that around 43 per cent of participants in Intensive Assistance and Job Search Training were in unsubsidised employment or in further education and training three months after leaving assistance.

The Government has recently released information that demonstrates that Job Network is delivering high quality services to job seekers, as well as large numbers of jobs. The *Survey of Job Seeker Perceptions of Job Network*, which was gathered from a national telephone survey of 15,000 job seekers, found that more than 80 per cent of job seekers were satisfied with the service provided through Job Network. Job Network was also seen to be providing a more professional and personalised service than that which was provided by the former CES.

This focus on competition and delivering quality services to job seekers has been maintained in the second contract period of Job Network, which builds on the successes of the first and provides job seekers and employers with high quality and relevant employment services.

There have also been a number of changes to how Job Network operates in the second contract period that will lead to improvements in how employment services are delivered to regional Australia. In the second Job Network contract, there are 19 tender regions and 137 Employment Service Areas (ESAs). This has improved coverage in regional, rural and remote Australia, as tenderers were able to specify the true cost of providing services in non-metropolitan ESAs.

The second contract period of Job Network, which commenced in February 2000, has seen a significant increase (from about 1400 to over 2000) in the number of sites from which Job Network services are delivered. Non-capital city sites have nearly doubled from about 600 to 1100, while more than 250 new Job Network sites (half in regional and rural areas) have been established in locations that did not have a regular Job Network presence.

The Government, through DEWRSB, continually monitors the performance of Job Network to ensure a high level of contractual compliance, performance, quality and equity of service delivery is maintained. Job Network members are required to supply DEWRSB with information on their activities and DEWRSB maintains close contact with members both at Head Office and local office levels. DEWRSB also carries out performance assurance visits.

Employment Services Contracts commit Job Network members to perform services to a high standard. Job Network members must participate in any general research, monitoring or evaluation programs undertaken by DEWRSB in relation to the effectiveness of the delivery of employment services. The Employment Services Contract also requires Job Network members to comply with all relevant State and Commonwealth legislation.

The performance of Job Network, and the fact that it is outperforming the CES, demonstrates that the introduction of competitive tendering and competition in the provision of employment services has led to better outcomes for job seekers. It is also clear that the Government has established effective and comprehensive measures through which it can evaluate and monitor the performance of Job Network.

RECOMMENDATION 10: That the Commonwealth investigate strategies to facilitate the provision of structured training opportunities and the implementation of appropriate accredited training packages to alleviate skill shortages in regional areas.

Response

The Government is committed to promoting life long learning to rural Australians. Skills development is increasingly being recognised as a cornerstone in building a sustainable, competitive and profitable regional Australia.

In January 1999, the Federal Government introduced the Rural and Regional New Apprenticeships incentive to boost training in rural and regional Australia. The Rural and Regional New Apprenticeships incentive provides an additional progression incentive payment of \$1,100 to employers of New Apprentices progressing from Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) level II training to AQF level III in defined trades and occupations experiencing skill shortages in non-metropolitan areas.

The 2000-01 Budget also provided funding for the Targeted Initiatives Program, a component of the Commonwealth's New Apprenticeships: Workforce Skills Development Program. Targeted initiatives builds on the former Educative Services and Strategic Intervention Programs (SIP) to fill the space between the New Apprenticeships marketing campaign, the New Apprenticeships Information Service and State and Territory information activities to support the implementation of Training Packages and New Apprenticeships.

The Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs has recently negotiated a new two year contract with the National Farmers Federation under the Targeted Initiatives Program. Under the new contract the NFF will deliver tailored messages to its members to increase their understanding of the New Apprenticeships system to enable them to better utilise its flexibilities and opportunities, including the ability to demand better service from New Apprenticeship Centres and Registered Training Organisations.

In November 1999, the Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs, Dr David Kemp, announced an initiative to address concerns over skill shortages in trade occupations. This initiative initially focussed on the automotive, electro-technology and engineering sectors and subsequently the building and construction, rural and food sectors are being examined. An essential element of the process is an analysis of regional and other factors contributing to skill shortages. Information from employer surveys and training packages for these industry areas will be used to help identify the skill sets required by industry.

At the National Industry Skills Forum on 28 April 2000, the Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs announced the formation of an industry led Rural Industries Working Group to review skills requirements across a

number of rural industry sectors. The Working Group has focussed on issues relating to production horticulture, shearing and shedhands, viticulture and the cotton industry and will report to Government at a second forum early in March 2001.

The Working Group is operating under the chairmanship of Wayne Cornish, Deputy President of the National Farmers Federation (NFF) and the process is coordinated by Rural Skills Australia on the NFF's behalf. It has received support from the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, other interested Commonwealth Government departments, the Australian National Training Authority and the National Centre for Vocational Education Research.

The Minister's Awards for Excellence for Rural and Regional Employers were launched by Dr Kemp in October 2000. These awards aim to publicly recognise, reward and promote the critical role employers of New Apprentices play in rural and regional Australia. Awards will be given to employers who are demonstrating best practice approaches to employment of New Apprentices. The awards, specifically targeted at rural and regional employers, will be awarded by New Apprenticeship Centre non- metropolitan regions. A total of 16 awards will be presented. The winner for each region will receive \$5,000. Winners will be announced in April 2001 and presented with their awards, by Dr Kemp in May 2001.

To support the range of New Apprenticeship initiatives including the work targeting skills shortages in rural and regional Australia the Commonwealth launched, in October 2000, a comprehensive communication strategy for New Apprenticeships in rural and regional Australia. This campaign comprises a new series of television advertisements incorporating specific messages designed to appeal directly to rural and regional Australia, as well as advertisements for rural and regional press and promotional material targeting rural and regional audiences. An integral and vital part of this campaign has been the development of opportunities for the Minister for Education Training and Youth Affairs to show ongoing support for and commitment to New Apprenticeships by participating in a range of closely targeted events/launches in rural Australia. These events bring together a wide range of audiences who can influence their local community as to the benefits of New Apprenticeships.

One example of a particular area facing skills shortages has arisen from the growth in renewable energy, particularly in renewable remote power supplies (RAPS) and domestic photo-voltaic (PV) installations. This growth places a heavy demand on the existing industry which will require considerable expansion. PV installations will be spread across regional areas as well as the capital cities, and RAPS are by definition located in regional areas and beyond. The need for accredited training packages to alleviate skill shortages in regional areas has been recognised by the Australian Greenhouse Office, training institutions and the sustainable energy industry. A steering committee is operating in cooperation with the National Utilities Electrotechnology Industry Training Advisory Board to develop accredited courses in the design and installation of renewable energy systems.

In June 2000, the Government announced that \$469,000 would be provided for a one year project, managed by Rural Skills Australia, to enhance the school to work transition for secondary school students contemplating a career in rural and related industries. This would be done by improving the current provision of quality structured workplace learning programs and school based part time traineeships. The project will focus on seven regional areas across Australia.

In the 2000-2001 Budget the Government also announced measures which recognise the particular health care needs of rural communities, and will provide more doctors in rural areas. The Government will fund bonded scholarships for 100 new medical students who commit to working in rural areas, and will offer an incentive for new medical graduates to work in rural areas by providing them with a Higher Education Contribution Scheme contribution.

RECOMMENDATION 11: That an independent monitoring body (similar to the former Employment Services Regulatory Authority) be established to oversee the operation of Job Network and monitor such issues as training provision and make regular public reports.

Note: Government Senators do not support the recommendation and believe that the responsibility for monitoring should remain with the Department of Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business.

Response

The Government has noted the views of the majority of the Committee on this issue. However, the Government has established, through DEWRSB, an effective and appropriate monitoring and evaluation strategy which ensures that Job Network delivers appropriate employment outcomes for job seekers in a cost-effective manner.

DEWRSB continually monitors the performance of Job Network to ensure that a high level of contractual compliance, performance, quality and equity of service delivery is maintained. Job Network members are required to supply DEWRSB with information on their activities and DEWRSB maintains close contact with members both at Head Office and local office levels. DEWRSB also carries out performance assurance visits.

Employment Services Contracts commit Job Network members to perform services to a high standard, to participate in any general research, monitoring or evaluation programs undertaken by DEWRSB and also to comply with all relevant State and Commonwealth legislation.

The Government also has in place an extensive evaluation and monitoring strategy for Job Network. The first stage of the strategy is an assessment of issues arising from the implementation of Job Network and early market experience. The Job Network Evaluation: Stage One implementation and market development report was made publicly available in February 2000. The second stage of the strategy will be a report, available in early 2001, examining how well the new arrangements are progressing. The third stage of the strategy will be an effectiveness report which will be available by December 2001, and will provide a comprehensive evaluation of the effectiveness of Job Network in improving the employment prospects of job seekers on a sustainable basis.

The evaluation will have a high degree of transparency and will include an independent review of the policy framework which will assess the strengths and weaknesses of Job Network policy to determine how it can be improved. A report of the Review is also planned for December 2001.

The Government has also introduced measures for the second contract period of Job Network to increase accountability in the delivery of Job Network Intensive Assistance services, while maintaining flexibility for Job Network members to tailor services to the needs of individual job seekers. Initiatives along these lines include the Declaration of Intent (DOI) and the Intensive Assistance Support Plan (IASP).

The DOI forms part of the contract between the Job Network member and the Commonwealth. It will be a summary of the services that a Job Network member expects to provide to job seekers referred for Intensive Assistance over the contract period. The IASP, negotiated and signed between the job seeker and the Job Network member, outlines activities and assistance Job Network members will provide to job seekers to place them into employment or education. IASPs will be mandatory if a job seeker is not in employment after three months of assistance, unless the job seeker is placed in employment during this period.

As well as managing the operation of Job Network, the Government is keen to facilitate the process whereby Job Network continues to provide high quality services to job seekers in the longer term. The Government is working on a wide range of strategies to facilitate this process of "market development" to ensure that Job Network builds on the impressive outcomes that have been achieved to date.

Accordingly, the Government does not believe it is necessary to establish an independent monitoring body to oversee the operation of Job Network.

RECOMMENDATION 12: That additional funding support for TAFE providers be negotiated with the states to improve the provision of structured training opportunities to meet changing local market opportunities.

Response

Consistent with the 1998-2000 Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) Agreement, States and Territories have delivered more training through efficiency gains and, in some cases, through additional State/Territory funding. In becoming partners to the Agreement, the States and Territories have already recognised their capacity to fund growth in their systems in this way.

Discussions on the ANTA Agreement for 2001-2003 are currently under way between Commonwealth, State and Territory Ministers. The final amount of Commonwealth funding for 2001 will be determined through this process.

In 2000, States and Territories collectively planned to deliver approximately 160,000 additional student places above the revised planned 1997 level, the agreed base for assessing growth. Under the ANTA Agreement, the States and Territories retain responsibility for their own training systems. This includes State level planning, regulation of training providers and the apprenticeship and traineeship system, allocation of funds to individual training providers and setting student fees and charges.

State and Territory planning processes determine the allocation of resources for training delivery to TAFE and other registered providers. Planning takes into account the training needs of local areas and the prevailing labour market conditions.

Primary responsibility for the funding of the vocational education and training (VET) system lies with the State and Territory governments who provided approximately \$2.9 billion for this purpose in 2000. In addition, the Commonwealth provided \$931 million under the *Vocational Education and Training Funding Act 1992* for allocation by ANTA to the States and Territories.

Over and above the funding provided by the Commonwealth to the States and Territories via the ANTA Agreement, in the 2000/01 financial year the Commonwealth will expend around \$500 million on training reforms and support, the bulk of which (around \$350 million) is for the New Apprenticeships employer incentives program.

RECOMMENDATION 13: That the Commonwealth evaluate the use of training incentives in meeting the needs of regional industries for increased structured training opportunities in categories of high employment growth.

Response

The growth in numbers of New Apprenticeships is quite evenly spread across metropolitan and regional Australia and the range of employer incentives for New Apprenticeships is available to all industries and all regions.

In addition, as already noted under Recommendation 10, in January 1999 the Federal Government introduced the Rural and Regional New Apprenticeships incentive to boost training in rural and regional Australia. The Rural and Regional New Apprenticeships incentive provides an additional progression incentive payment of \$1,100 to employers of New Apprentices progressing from Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) level II training to AQF level III in defined trades and occupations experiencing skill shortages in non-metropolitan areas.

RECOMMENDATION 14: That local government must play a pivotal role in the coordination of any future regional development policy.

Response

The Federal Government recognises the important role local government has to play in addressing the challenges confronting regional Australia.

To this end, local government was well represented at the Regional Australia Summit. Local government attendance at the Summit included representatives from individual councils as well as from the South Australian, Queensland, Northern Territory and Tasmanian Local Government Associations, the Municipal Associations of Victoria and Western Australia, and the Australian Local Government Association (ALGA).

In recognition of the need for all three tiers of government to work more closely together on regional development issues, the Australian Local Government Association was represented at meetings between Commonwealth, State and Territory Regional Development Ministers on 29 March and 3 November 2000 (see also response to Recommendation 2 and Attachment B).

Local government has a strong involvement in the activities of Area Consultative Committees. ACCs play a role in sharing and disseminating information in local communities and presenting information and feedback from regions to government on the operation of key initiatives such as workplace relations and Rural Transaction Centres. ACCs are an important source and sharer of information through which they influence, support and promote government policy directions and services for the benefit of their communities.

Local government also has an important role to play in relation to regional development policy. It is responsible for delivering and regulating a wide range of economic and human services and providing engineering services and infrastructure. It plays a major role in environmental management and provides leadership to local communities. Local government in these roles is a major determinant in the way regional development is pursued.

The Local Government Incentive Program (LGIP) recognises the need for support to be given to local councils to improve the delivery of services and to lead local communities. In 1999-2000, around \$3 million was provided to help councils comply with the requirements of the GST legislation; in 2000-01, around \$4 million will be allocated to assist local government in addressing the Government's priorities, particularly in regional Australia.

The Program will focus on three priority areas:

- activities that lead to the adoption of best practice and sharing of technical expertise across councils;

- the promotion of an enhanced role for local government in leading their communities; and
- increasing the capacity of local government to contribute to regional development.

The National Awards for Innovation in Local Government (NAILG) recognise the role local government plays in regional development policy. It does so by having a business and regional development category that recognises innovation in the development of communities and regional economies through the facilitation and growth of business ventures, infrastructure, tourism and export opportunities.

RECOMMENDATION 15: That a forum, similar to the Regional Australia Summit, should be convened periodically. The programming and arrangements for these events should involve all levels of government.

Response

A key objective of the Regional Australia Summit was to gather a broad range of ideas on how best to meet the challenges facing regional Australia. It also aimed to identify the roles that government, the corporate and community sectors should take in responding to those challenges. All levels of government were well represented at the Summit.

The Government was pleased with the outcome of the Summit and the positive and constructive nature of the contribution it made to addressing the problems facing regional Australia.

At the conclusion of the Summit, a Steering Committee was established by the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Transport and Regional Services, the Hon John Anderson MP. The Steering Committee has a stewardship role in carrying forward and ensuring action on the Summit deliberations and will work to deliver the outcomes the Summit identified. An implementation plan was developed by Christmas 1999 and an interim report was delivered in April 2000. A final report (see Introductory Remarks) has now been released. While the Government is attracted to the Summit model, a decision on whether to convene any further forums of this kind has not yet been made.

Regional Forums are a trial, as part of the Commonwealth's "whole of government" approach to regional Australia. They bring together a considered approach to the sustainable future of a region as well as being a mechanism for governments, particularly the Commonwealth, to address how they interact with, and provide services for, a region. The Government agreed to trial Regional Forums before deciding on a program across Australia. The first trial was in the Spencer Gulf area of South Australia. The Whyalla Forum was widely considered a success. An independent evaluation is nearing completion.

In addition, on 13 September 1999 Senator the Hon Ian Macdonald, Minister for Regional Services, Territories and Local Government announced the Northern Australia Forum. The area covered was all of Australia above the Tropic of Capricorn, including the:

- (a) area covered by the Central Queensland Area Consultative Committee;
- (b) Northern Territory; and
- (c) the area covered by the Gascoyne Development Commission in Western Australia.

The Territories of Christmas Island and the Cocos (Keeling) Islands were also covered.

Although this was a Federal Government initiated activity, the States, Territory, local government and private sector were invited to be partners, as with the forum previously held and those planned for the future. The Department of Transport and Regional Services is the lead Federal agency and will coordinate a whole of government response by the Commonwealth. This is expected to be completed by mid 2001.

Given the size and range of issues for northern Australia, twenty-one pre-summit local consultations were held across the north, which helped to set the agenda and feed into the Forum.

The broad objectives of the Forum were to:

- identify the direction for northern Australia into the new millennium, especially the economic development of northern Australia;
- build on the outcomes of the *Regional Australia Summit* held in October 1999; and
- plan for the sustainable future of northern Australia, especially emerging industry opportunities.

The Government recognises the importance of continuing consultation as a way of evaluating the effectiveness of Government policies and programs. Consultation is also an important way of developing 'bottom up' solutions, developing partnerships between the public and private sectors, improving coordination between governments and developing innovative strategies. The trial Spencer Gulf Regional Forum and the Northern Australia Forum are two examples of how such consultation may occur. The Government will consider the independent evaluations in deciding whether to establish a continuous forums program.

RECOMMENDATION 16: The establishment of a Ministerial Council on regional development involving all three spheres of government on the COAG model. The Council should meet regularly to establish policy priorities for regional development and discuss policy impacts on regional Australia. The consultative forum would then report directly to the Ministerial Council.

Response

In his closing address to the Regional Australia Summit, the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Transport and Regional Services, the Hon John Anderson MP, acknowledged the need for all three tiers of government to work more closely together on regional development issues. On 29 March 2000 he convened a meeting of State and Territory Ministers responsible for regional development and the Australian Local Government Association to better address coordination of government activities in regional Australia.

This meeting agreed to establish a clear framework for cooperation between all levels of government on regional development issues and established a taskforce of senior officials to work through some immediate and concrete opportunities. The taskforce reported to the meeting of Regional Development Ministers and the ALGA in November 2000 with proposals for improved cooperation between the three levels of government in Australia which were endorsed at the meeting. As noted in the response to Recommendation 2, the taskforce is currently investigating a number of development issues and will report to Regional Development Ministers and the ALGA on the progress of these issues.

ATTACHMENT A**Summit Communiqué****Friday 29 October 1999****REGIONAL, RURAL AND REMOTE AUSTRALIANS WANT TO DETERMINE THEIR OWN FUTURES**

Delegates to the Regional Australia Summit agreed that regional (including rural and remote) Australians want to shape their own futures.

This should be in a journey of partnership.

The Summit, proposed by the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Transport and Regional Services, the Hon John Anderson, was called in response to the perception that Australia was at risk of splitting into two nations.

The Minister believes the difficulties being experienced by regional Australians and traditional industries as they embrace technological change, globalisation, microeconomic reform and rationalisation of services provided by both governments and the private sector should be a concern to all Australians.

Two hundred and eighty-two delegates from a range of community, government and business organisations throughout Australia met in Canberra for three days to discuss contemporary problems and opportunities in regional Australia. They developed suggestions for community, industry and government actions to create a positive future for regional Australia. Regional Australia has high expectations of outcomes from the Summit.

The Summit acknowledged that regional Australians have a long and proud history of adaptability and creativity.

However, to respond to the opportunities of the next millennium and the many challenges currently confronting regional Australia, the Summit has agreed that new partnerships now need to be forged among Governments, business and communities – all of whom have to play their part.

The Summit called for the new partnership to be based on respect – renewed respect for regional Australia on the part of urban Australians.

This renewed respect should include acceptance of the differences between urban and regional Australia – and between different regional communities. It also should include more comprehensive participation by regional Australians in decisions affecting them and the broader Australian community.

Delegates listened to Australian and international speakers and several case studies in plenary sessions between intensive meetings of twelve working groups covering a range of themes.

The plenary presentations covered demographic changes, natural resource management, government, business, technological and community developments in rural and regional communities, both here and overseas.

The Summit acknowledged indigenous leaders' commitment to be partners in sharing their knowledge and skills in the future development of regional communities, both economically and socially. The indigenous leaders sought the commitment of regional Australia to a process of inclusiveness in future regional development strategies.

Senior business leaders, Federal and State/Territory government ministers and senior community representatives also met during the Summit to discuss ways of creating effective partnerships between regional communities, the private sector and government at all levels.

Outcomes to emerge from the Summit, common to a number of themes, included:

- There are no easy solutions to the problems facing regional Australia. These problems are shared by many countries.
- Community development will not happen without government, business and community stakeholders each making their various contributions towards locally developed plans within a regional context.
- Communities that have re-invented themselves have identified and capitalised on their natural strengths, resources and self-interest to enhance their environmental assets and generate economic and social development.
- Communities want to share responsibility with government for development of their regions. Communities don't want solutions imposed on them. One size does not fit all.
- Government, industries and communities must invest significant ongoing resources in skilling, learning, education and training, and leadership to develop the human capacity of regional Australia. Distribution of these resources needs to be inclusive of all sectors of regional society.
- Communities want to include and invest in their youth.
- One of the most extraordinary assets of regional Australia is our *unique natural environment, a natural heritage that is a rich and evocative element of our national identity*. The Summit recognises that mistakes have been made in the management of the natural resources which contribute so much to our current wealth and quality of life. All Australians share a responsibility to restore the productive capacity of our rural landscapes for the benefit of current and future

Australians. Equally, the Summit recognises the great economic and social opportunities our vast, unique rural landscapes offer us to develop new products, services and enterprises based on world-leading management of our natural resources.

- Governments, industries and communities must ensure affordable, reliable access to telecommunications. Professional advice must be available to maximise the community and economic opportunities provided by rapidly emerging developments in information technology.
- Indigenous people are stakeholders in regional Australia.
- Governments must accept responsibility for facilitating adequate provision and maintenance of basic infrastructure. People in all sectors of regional Australia need equitable standards and access to essential services, including telecommunications, power and energy, water, transport, health and education. Creative ways of providing infrastructure that is widely accessible need to be explored, without imposing unreasonable costs on regional industries or communities.
- Governments, urban business and industry must become more responsive to the unique requirements of sectors and areas of regional Australia in designing and delivering programs and services.
- The three tiers of governments must remove unnecessary regulatory impediments which increase the cost of doing business and stifle innovation and action in regional Australia.
- Governments must create a climate, including tax incentives, which encourages investment for rural enterprise and philanthropy.
- Key business leaders expressed their support for the idea of partnerships but sought commitment from the Federal Government to “take some risks” which would assist business, rather than create barriers that serve to hinder private sector investment in regional Australia. Their view was that tax incentives were a crucial factor in attracting investment to areas outside the major metropolitan areas.

Participants welcomed the announcement of a new rural foundation which demonstrates the commitment to a philanthropic partnership between Government, industry and regional Australia.

The major priorities identified by each theme group are identified below.

Communications

The Summit urged delivery of communications services which meet the anticipated economic, social and cultural needs, to allow businesses to compete in the use of electronic commerce and the internet to allow people to live interesting and fulfilling lives where they choose to live them.

Key strategies should include encouraging competition in the provision of affordable, equitable and timely access to high quality communications services. Government intervention should occur where the market fails to deliver. Local call access to the nearest service centre should be ensured.

The development of a mechanism providing specialised information and expertise about the use of the Internet and electronic commerce in regional Australia should be resourced. The coverage, affordability and functionality of mobile communications should be improved to ensure regional Australia is not left behind in the telecommunications revolution. The ABC and other broadcasters should have the capacity to generate and transmit local content for local, regional and national audiences.

Infrastructure

The Summit urged delivery of a basic level of access to services, particularly energy, water, health and education, as a right of all Australians in regional areas. A national coordination strategy for infrastructure, recognising special solutions for special problems, is essential and the Federal Government can lead the process through a proactive approach to facilitate infrastructure provision and funding. Delivery of projects is the responsibility of all levels of government and the private sector.

Health

The Summit urged recognition that optimal health status for all regional Australians requires recognition of the specific health needs of rural and remote residents. This can only be achieved through empowering communities and developing partnerships which change the dominant metropolitan-focused mindset, overcome barriers to access, ensure equitable resource allocation, enable appropriate workforce supply and service models and take account of the wide range of social and economic determinants of health.

Community well being and lifestyle

The Summit urged the development of community capacity and leadership including in our young people. Access to services and infrastructure must be provided through flexible delivery that recognises regional diversity and is based on partnerships. Communities driving their futures should base them on environmental foundations, vision and local assets.

Government – local, state, federal

The Summit urged the Federal, State and local governments and ATSIC to accept joint responsibility through a MOU for the designation or creation of a recognised regional body for each regional community to provide a brokering role to facilitate the development of that region's interests. A capital trust to finance promising opportunities was supported.

Finance and facilitating entrepreneurship

The Summit called for action to achieve a more efficient and effective market for capital in regional Australia. It urged the removal of regulatory impediments to entrepreneurship. It called for the development of a new, modern regional business culture and paradigm to be stimulated by a rural and regional business foundation.

Value-adding to regional communities and farming industries

The Summit urged recognition of the need for Government to create a supportive business climate, ensuring provision, maintenance and enhancement of infrastructure and cost effective delivery of accessible services. Governments and business should form partnerships to meet the enormous opportunities available for value adding to industries and local communities.

A joint vision and strategy is required from three tiers of government to reduce impediments to value adding and harness opportunities. Fostering of leadership and entrepreneurship is also necessary to create value for rural communities.

New industries and new opportunities

The Summit urged that governments, the corporate sector and communities develop partnerships to create an environment which encourages and supports new industries and opportunities for regional Australia through eliminating unnecessary bureaucratic processes and encouraging a spirit of community interest. The Government's role should be as a catalyst to ensure this happens.

Community and industry leadership

The Summit clearly identified effective leadership in all sectors and at all levels throughout regional Australia is the key to building the future. The Summit calls for the Federal Government to commit to leadership development in regional Australia through the provision of sufficient funds to empower communities and industry to shape their own futures as vibrant and productive communities and industries. The objective is to engage all levels of government, industry and the community in partnership, to build leadership from the "inside out" throughout regional Australia.

Education and Training

The Summit urges all levels of government, industry and communities to develop strategies which ensure equality of access to quality education and training in regional Australia. Regional Australians must develop a culture of lifelong learning to enable them to adapt to, and maximise the benefits from, change. Education providers, governments, business and community members must collaborate to deliver significant improvements in learning and

education opportunities which should be determined by the communities themselves.

Philanthropy and partnerships

The Summit urges a greater understanding of, and renewed respect between, regional and urban Australia and there is an opportunity for philanthropy to take a strategic role in enhancing the natural and human assets of regional Australia for community and economic development.

Sustainable resource management

The Summit urged recognition of the increasing scale and scope of the environmental challenges facing regional communities, caused by decades of government policy and action by the community and government. These inherited problems are beyond the capacity of regional Australians alone to respond to. Therefore the partnership between all levels of government, communities and individuals must be strengthened with the Federal Government providing national leadership through greater and longer-term commitment.

CONCLUSION

Delegates have appreciated the opportunities presented by this Summit to be heard and to offer suggestions for a better future for regional Australia. Expectations in regional Australia have been raised and vigorous action is required by all parties if regional Australia is not to be disappointed.

Delegates look forward to details of an implementation plan before Christmas and regular reports on progress.

ATTACHMENT B**COMMUNIQUE*****Regional Development Ministers, Australian Local Government Meeting
Canberra, 3 November******GOVERNMENTS COLLABORATE FOR A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE FOR
REGIONAL AUSTRALIA***

The three tiers of government agreed today on how to progress plans for improving coordination and collaboration for the benefit of regional Australia.

Convened by Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Transport and Regional Services, John Anderson, Commonwealth, State and Territory Regional Development Ministers and the Australian Local Government Association met in Canberra and agreed on a framework for cooperation and guiding principles. They committed to:

- minimise duplication and overlap
- encourage communities to set their own priorities
- cooperate with each other
- cooperate with the private sector
- use existing systems wherever possible
- build on the competitive and comparative advantage of regions, and
- consult with each other wherever possible, where new programmes and services are being developed.

The focus is on what is deliverable and achievable. Specifically, all spheres of government agreed to:

- build alliances and bilateral agreements for delivering localised community programmes, including business centres, shop fronts, Rural Transaction Centres and government information access centres;
- collaborate on the development of publications and information dissemination to provide a streamlined and accessible source of information on government programmes to people living in regional Australia;
- collaborate on economic, social and environmental objectives to ensure sustainability for local communities; and
- encourage better utilisation and leveraging of funds through collaborative assessment of project applications.

Importantly, today's meeting also addressed some critical, ongoing issues in regional Australia, with State governments leading discussion and providing direction in: