

NARRANDERA SHIRE COUNCIL

RESPONSE TO THE AGRICULTURAL COMPETITIVENESS GREEN PAPER

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"The Australian Government's agricultural policy is driven by one key objective: to achieve a better return at the farm gate to ensure a sustainable and competitive Australian agriculture sector." P. vii

OPENING UP THE ENVELOPE

The top policies from the Green Paper imperative to the sustainable and competitive future of

agriculture are outlined in chapters two, seven and nine. These chapters in order of appearance are titled Infrastructure, Education, Skills, Training and Labour and Water and Natural Resource Management, respectively. However, order of priority, relative to the future of industry begins with accumulated knowledge associated with land and water. As such, Water and Natural Resource Management should be the main focus of the White Paper carefully followed by

Infrastructure and Education, Skills, Training and Labour. This is not to say, any of the policy areas outlined in the Green Paper should be forgotten or overlooked.

Each of the policy sectors remain significant and important to the future of sustainable and competitive agricultural industries. The decider of the top three is based on the knowledge that without secure investment in water and natural resources; transport systems and telecommunication systems; education and training, further policies cannot come into play. These three policy sectors are cornerstones from which the remaining policies emanate as the sustainable development and competitive benchmarks surrounding current rural communities grow. Communities only mature, flourish and thrive where there is ready availability and accessibility to water, transport and communication.

Uptake of any change to general infrastructure always relies on gentle and persuasive modes of discussion. Beginning with a discussion on how access to and engagement with water, transport and communication through government and private entity initiatives can contribute to a better world.

“Agricultural production is underpinned by the sustainable use of land and water resources.” P. 8

In response to this policy, our proposition is the construction of a solar water storage and recreational facility that takes advantage of “...a series of natural depressions just north of the Murrumbidgee River at Narrandera.” (Lake Mejum report, 1984 p. 1)

WATER AND NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

Lake Coolah Storage Proposal

The Murrumbidgee River System feeds 27% of the natural water flow into the River Murray. The 2008 NSW Water Solutions review identifies structures and flow operations are required to regulate the natural water flow. Infrastructure intrinsic to alleviating “... ecological issues or enhance the ecology of the Murrumbidgee and River Murray riverine environment.” (Report no. DC07085, 2008. P.iii) is a core strategy. The proposed Lake Coolah Storage Proposal aligns with current government initiatives including the Murray-Darling Basin Plan “...prioritising water recovery through on- and off- farm infrastructure investments”, Sustainable Rural Water Use and Infrastructure Programme, (Green Paper, p. xxx) flooding and drought directives (Rebuilding NSW, Discussion Paper, August 2014) currently being explored. “Funds will be explicitly reserved to ensure NSW has adequate protection from Major Flood events and will investigate the need for more regional dams” (Press Release, Regional Roads and Water Funds, June 2014). The NSW government’s direction supported by a 2002 report from the Department of Land and Water (Contract no. DLWC 2001/100) calculate, “A reduction in summer peak flows and an increase in winter flows can be achieved by the construction of a mid catchment storage.” such as the Lake Coolah Storage Proposal (featured as Strategy A, p.ii in the 2002 report, Investigation of Options for Reducing High Summer Flows in the Tumut River) further aligning the Basin Plan (Murray Darling Basin Authority, May 2014, p. 5) with the Lake Coolah Storage Proposal by enabling water recovery.

The productive use of Lake Coolah (including Lake Mejum and surrounding natural depressions) is a “...low cost project when compared with alternatives of a major new headworks storage.” (Lake Mejum report, 1984. p. 11) Lake Coolah filled as a result of the 2012 flood and with an adjoining wetland area the natural system delivers cultural and social benefits to local communities of Narrandera, Leeton, Yanco, Griffith, Colleambally and surrounding districts.

Further, enabling adequate quantities of water for irrigated food and fibre production needed to alleviate growing pressure on food production in Australia and world-wide as the world population grows. Estimates for the Australian population is predicted to be 30 million by 2050.

Once a pre-feasibility study is commissioned with the support of the NSW Government's Office of Water a full feasibility study and business plan can be commissioned to include feedback from local land-owners and indigenous populations. So far, there are five relevant studies to support the construction of the Lake Coolah Storage Proposal (as of July 2014). With the most recent reports welcoming the ecological benefits to the River Murray system as well as the social and economic benefits for Narrandera and surrounding district residents. The scope of the benefits outweighing any perceived economic, ecological or cultural disadvantages. Further, breakthrough telecommunication and engineering solutions such as solar used for pumping water would result in state of the art just-in-time delivery of water for irrigation at competitive prices.

“Reliable, efficient and accessible infrastructure underpins the competitiveness of the agriculture sector and enables opportunity for growth.” (Green Paper, p.72)

Proposition 1: an Inland Rail service between Melbourne and Brisbane taking into account the Food Bowls of Australia, Darling Downs, Sunraysia, Goulburn Valley and the Riverina.

INFRASTRUCTURE

“Lifting performance, particularly for the middle 50 percent of farms, towards the levels achieved by the top 25 percent will be critical to attracting the capital and labour required to meet the market opportunities ahead while making sure family farms stay as the cornerstone of Australian agriculture.” (Green Paper, p.6)

Food Bowl Inland Rail Route

The end of peak oil supply in 1967 makes access to this finite resource more dangerous and expensive by the day. The up-scaling of rail freight modes to alleviate pressure on this precious commodity “...relies on complimentary investment in road and intermodal hubs to provide connections to the farm gate.” (Green Paper, p.10) Within this framework transport infrastructure takes on renewed significance and value as transport infrastructure is “... critical to Australia’s competitiveness.” (Green Paper, p. 8) The Inland Rail Food Bowl rail route meets the sustainability imperatives of competitiveness in many ways including:

- impressive rail-contestable export demand from the Food Bowl regions opening up more opportunities for competition between export gateways
- improvements to national freight network reliability and resilience leading to greater security for logistical supply/demand chains
- benefits of a solid social network and what this network creates for the freight rail industry
- reducing operating costs through shorter route length and transit times and lesser gradients and curvatures
- opportunities to maximize the use of existing intermodal and rail corridor infrastructure
- the wider externality benefits derived from attracting more freight from the Food Bowl to rail in particular reduced road damage costs borne by local governments

The Food Bowl Inland Rail Alliance (FBIRA) is a government implementation group represented by the shires and regional cities of Mitchell, Moira, and Greater Shepparton in Victoria and Berrigan, Jerilderie, Urana, Griffith, Leeton and Narrandera in NSW. The July 2010 Australian Rail Track Corporation (ARTC) study showed inland freight of agricultural products had a long term growth of 2.2% (p.9) this was later revealed in a 2014 study as a gross underestimate of what is now contestable regional export demand for agricultural goods due to recent free trade agreements with China and other Asian trading partners. With growth since the initial Inland Rail alignment studies much stronger than forecast, the region's export potential is set to boom.

A good case can be delivered for the regions capacity to meet increasing demand locally and globally as land owners, mostly families, capitalize on intrinsic farming skills. Generational farming further enabling strong relationships between business owners to provide much needed support in times of growth as well as need. Casella Wines bottles, boxes and pallets 36, 000 bottles an hour with exports accounting for 85% of the \$344 million annual revenue reported in 2013. Casella Wines is responsible for 27% of Australian bottled table wine exports. The Food Bowls double capacity as growers and processors alongside double stacking of freight opportunities and the re-use of existing underutilized or abandoned rail corridors and intermodal terminals is efficient and effective in reducing farming operating costs at the farm gate.

"...when pick up and delivery costs are incorporated in the inland railway door to door price, the price of freight carried on Inland Rail is estimated to be 52.2% of that applying to road transport." (Melbourne-Brisbane Inland Rail Alignment Study, 2010, p.13)

“...ongoing skills development, education and training [is] important to retain and attract new entrants to farming.” (Green Paper, p. 53)

Proposition 2: the rollout of a high-speed broadband network utilizing a combination of Optical Fibre, Fixed Wireless and Satellite technology to offer advanced broadband services to premises across Australia.

EDUCATION, SKILLS, TRAINING and LABOUR

“The Government is rolling out Australia’s first national wholesale-only, open access communications network to bring high-speed broadband and telephone services within the reach of all Australian premises.” (Green Paper, p.14)

Fibre Optic Network Deployment

NBN Co offers a fair solution identifying the importance of community consultation, for existing infrastructure and new site infrastructure and offers to “...work closely with Council staff to achieve the best possible outcome for all.” (Fixed Wireless Network Deployment, p. 6). The rollout of Fixed Wireless telecommunications service is now long overdue and the Narrandera Shire Council has worked hard to gain the attention of NBN Co with success in facilitating Wireless and Satellite service for the outlying Narrandera area. Unfortunately, the National Broadband Network (NBN) process and by association NBN Co. in failing to install the first step of the 3-step process, Optic Fibre, in the urban centre of town of Narrandera, the hub of thriving agricultural and urban businesses and communities, has left businesses and communities floundering and unable to plan ahead, straining relationships due to overwhelmingly unreliable telecommunication access. Despite active attempts from the Narrandera Shire Council to realize the first step of Optic Fibre installation, the most considered response from NBN Co is that it will be beyond 2017. Further, to this disappointment, is the NSW Government’s discussion paper entitled Rebuilding NSW (August 2014) which makes no mention of the role the NBN in the future of NSW. By so doing the NSW Government gives the impression of failing to recognize the significance of telecommunications technology. By association demonstrating a failure to understand what role the NBN can and does already play in sustainable development and competitiveness for both rural and urban Australian environments.

“The Government is committed to ensuring farmers and regional communities have access to reliable and affordable communications systems.” (Green Paper p. 17) Narrandera Shire Council proposes NBN Co., a wholly Federal Government owned company established to design, build and operate the National Broadband Network (NBN) be commissioned to plan and execute the first stage of the rollout process, ie. Optic Fibre cable in the centre of the town of Narrandera and that the completion of this 3-step process be repeated for all regional town and city centres in Australia. Secure and reliable telecommunication networks are imperative to the sustainable future of agriculture regions Australia-wide through enabling enhanced quality of life in the “...provision of new and better services for health, education, business and entertainment.” (Fixed Wireless Network Deployment, p. 4) Further, enabling “...real-time access to market information; improving interaction with friends and family...and facilitating training to agricultural producers through online tertiary and vocational education courses...reducing population flow from rural to urban areas.”

The NBN Rollout contributes to important economic, environmental and social infrastructure by enabling population mobility to rural areas in the facilitation of health, education, business and entertainment flexibility and transparency. Over \$2 billion is said to be available to design and build long term satellite services (LTSS) “...designed to bring a step change in the experience of broadband users in regional and remote Australia...” (Green Paper, p.15). While the Black Spot Programme is availed \$100 million to “...improve mobile coverage and increase competition by rolling out new mobile base stations.” (Green Paper, p. 15) It must be brought to the attention of the Federal Government that the fixed wireless network directive is one of three major cornerstones in Australia’s remote communities. Investment in NBN infrastructure for rural communities will unlock competitive practice and performance capacities historically intrinsic to rural life. Australia’s rural townships and cities need Optic Fibre, Wireless and Satellite technologies as soon as possible. A date for completion should be set and resources activated at due haste. The Australian Federal Government and State Governments have a joint competitive interest and obligation to give back to major agricultural service centers, especially those proactive in their service to their communities, such as Narrandera and surrounding districts. By enabling timely access to the NBN, the Government unlocks these communities’ capacities to become peak agricultural hubs on what is now, in the 21st century, a world stage.