

Submission by the City of Greater Bendigo to the Issues Paper on Agricultural Competitiveness

Support

The City of Greater Bendigo strongly supports the Commonwealth Government's initiative in preparing a White Paper on agricultural competitiveness and ensuring a widely consultative process in the development of the Paper and welcomes the opportunity to provide comment on the Issues Paper.

The City submits that the Issues Paper broadly scopes the range of matters that relate to agricultural competitiveness.

Content of the Issues Paper

The City submits that greater attention needs to be given in the Issues Paper to the following matters:

- Greater levels of support for agricultural education delivered in rural and regional Australia,
- The need for critical infrastructure investment: road, rail, air, telecommunications and IT that supports productivity in rural and regional Australia,
- A particular focus of Council's submission is to ensure that the Australian government has a broader awareness and better understanding that major regional centres – regional capitals such as Bendigo, play a vital role in the competitiveness of Australian agriculture and that one of the most significant actions that the Commonwealth can take is to invest in the physical, economic and social infrastructure of regional cities such as Bendigo.

The Role of Regional Cities in Supporting Agricultural Competitiveness

The City submits that the future of Australian agriculture is increasingly dependent on regional cities providing quality support services to agriculture, agribusiness, the agricultural workforce, the movement of goods and commodities, communications, the retention of young persons in agriculture and the quality of life of the farming community. The City submits that this key element in Australia's agricultural competitiveness is overlooked in the Issues Paper.

How Bendigo Supports Agriculture

The City of Greater Bendigo encompasses a physical area of 3,000 square kilometres and as such supports substantial agriculture within its own municipality. But it is the regional role that the city plays which is vital for agriculture in central and northern Victoria and parts of southern NSW. Bendigo provides a series of support services in health, education, finance, and social support that underpin the confidence of the agricultural sector to invest. Where parts of rural Australia lack those support infrastructure and services, levels of investment and confidence in the future is impacted.

Historically, Bendigo saw its wealth generated through both gold mining and farming produce. Bendigo quickly developed as a manufacturing and processing centre and a transport hub - roles that have continued. Today, Bendigo is a thriving regional capital with population of over 100,000, a population growth rate of 1.7% per annum and directly serving a regional population of 200,000 centred on one of Australia's most productive agricultural regions. Bendigo has Victoria's largest livestock exchange, an intensive animal industry that directly and indirectly supports 3,000 jobs, and high level business services to the agricultural sector such as the headquarters of the Rural Finance Corporation of Victoria and the head office of the Bendigo and Adelaide Bank which, through its widely acclaimed Community Bank network, has strongly supported scores of rural communities.

While these roles and services directly relate to agriculture, it is the presence of services in areas such as health and education that also provide critical elements of the regional economy and play a major role in providing the confidence for farmers to invest in agriculture. Evidence of this role is that Bendigo is currently undertaking a \$630m expansion of its Hospital – the largest project of its type in regional Victoria. The new larger Bendigo Hospital will serve much of northern Victoria and southern NSW. Having access to quality health services is vital for the agricultural sector. Similarly in education, the campuses of La Trobe and Monash universities in Bendigo assist in underpinning higher participation by rural students in education.

Bendigo is currently seeking Commonwealth government funds to expand its airport capacity. Not only will this directly support investment in agriculture in the region, but also the airport already plays a critical

emergency services support role for much of rural and regional Victoria. Bendigo is the headquarters for emergency services such as the air ambulance and fire fighting helicopters and planes. Bendigo is currently developing a major business park at Marong, west of Bendigo, to expand the capacity of the city to service sectors such as agriculture, and to provide an 'inland port' capacity. These investments are vital to continue to maintain the connectedness of our region.

The Need for Greater Emphasis in the Issues Paper on the Role of Regional Centres

Future investment in Australian agriculture depends on a wide range of factors that have been extensively discussed in the Issues Paper. The City submits that inadequate attention has been paid in the Issues Paper on the reliance of farmers, the agricultural workforce and their families on the vital role played by regional centres in underpinning their quality of life. The Issues Paper notes that a characteristic of rural and regional Australia has been the decline in the role and services played by many small towns and the subsequent loss of population.

The Issues Paper suggests that one of the roles of agriculture is to support rural and regional service centres and that therefore a more productive and competitive agriculture sector will support country towns and regional centres. Undoubtedly it will, but it is submitted that this is only half the picture - strong regional centres with key infrastructure support agriculture and investment in agriculture. The agricultural sector and the families supported by it must have confidence that they possess a strong regional centre able to provide a quality range of services, facilities and infrastructure. In order to retain population in rural areas, particularly young people, strong well-resourced regional centres that provide a base for further investment and secure access to critical infrastructure and services are vital.

By the Commonwealth investing in critical infrastructure such as broadband, airports, regional rail freight and road networks and the distribution and 'hub' role of regional centres, it expands the likelihood of much greater private sector investment in agriculture. Poorly resourced regional centres will lessen investment in agriculture. Proposals such as directly connecting rail from Victoria to Darwin with rail freight through the national grid will drive efficiencies in transport and open up markets in Southeast Asia. Investments in transport

infrastructure are a large component of Australia regaining greater competitiveness in agriculture.

Conclusion

Market forces and efficiencies have led to the growing importance of major regional centres to support the rural sector. The liveability and services that regional centres provide are critical to the support of the agricultural sector and further investment in it.

Australia is more likely to see investment in agriculture where people and communities are well connected to regional centres that meet their needs for health, medical, cultural and education. Strengthening the network of well-connected accessible regional centres is vital for agriculture and supports agricultural investment and competitiveness.