



**NSW FARMERS ASSOCIATION
Hunter Branch**

Submission to the Draft Hunter Regional Plan

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Introduction

This submission is compiled from feedback from NSW Farmers members directly affected by the Draft Hunter Regional Plan.

Identified Agricultural issues

This Draft plan makes much mention of the Critical Industry Clusters of Equine and Viticulture, and makes some mention of Oysters and Aquaculture, but no mention is made of other agricultural industries, save for two dot points on page 32.

This indicates a plan that is heavily skewed toward the existing identified Biophysical and Strategic Agricultural Land (BSAL) and gives indication that there is no scope for any future mapping to take place, for any new areas to be declared BSAL nor for there to be other areas that do not meet the current criteria for BSAL but yet are highly productive to be recognised. This is a short sighted and blinkered approach to agriculture in the Hunter.

Agricultural Resources

The draft plan acknowledges that the Hunter region has a moderate climate, fertile soils and quality water resources. Only recently has there been acknowledgement of critical industry clusters for equine and viticulture industries and biophysical strategic agricultural land. There is more land suitable for productive agriculture outside these clusters although it is not classified as highly fertile. Successive governments have shied away from protecting these areas to allow extractive industries to spread almost unchecked. The contraction of extractive industries may significantly impact extensive resources including labour, housing, water, land and other infrastructure. The draft plan fails to acknowledge the changing circumstances let alone plan for other economic activity.

Infrastructure issues

There have been significant public capital works in the Hunter in recent years including the Hunter Expressway and rail triplication. Most of that has benefited the coal industry although it also brings some benefits to other sectors. There are however major shortcomings.

Passenger rail transport from Scone and Dungog to Newcastle and then Sydney is significantly worse than ten years ago. Service frequency is reduced, times are inconvenient and speed has slowed. Steam trains from Newcastle to Sydney were faster than electric trains are now. Heavy rail into Newcastle CBD has ended with only a promise of light rail. The short journey by light rail from Wickham to the CBD makes it inconvenient for passengers adding another mode change and is wasteful because it could go to other destinations past Wickham to become economically viable.

Northern NSW is at a significant import/export disadvantage as it has no container capability. With the inevitable reduction in bulk coal export space will once again become available in Newcastle for wharf space for general cargo and additional bulk grain. Development of these facilities would reduce the severe transport constraints of getting cargo in and out of Port Botany and Port Kembla. Extensive rail infrastructure already exists around Newcastle Port to service these needs.

Technical education services (TAFE and other tertiary education institutions) have been centralised to sites that are mostly unreachable by public transport. The rationalisation and redevelopment of health services to provide prompt and good health outcomes to regional communities is of prime importance. There is an important shortcoming in Action 4.2.7 as there is no mention of hospitals in Muswellbrook and Scone or health centres in Denman and Merriwa.

The road network diminishes soon after the end of the Hunter Expressway and there are no published plans for major improvements. The Muswellbrook by-pass has been discussed for decades, with a route planned, but the route has subsequently been mined. The community is eagerly awaiting the promised consultation regarding the Muswellbrook Bypass announced for late 2016.

Improved road and rail connections in the Hunter and to the neighbouring regions for both goods and passengers are essential for improved and diversified activity.

Natural Environment and Biodiversity issues

The Regional Plan correctly identifies the need to restore and enhance connectivity of areas of high natural heritage value. In particular rehabilitation of mine sites could provide connectivity particularly in the area between Muswellbrook and Singleton and is identified in the Plan. Currently each of the mine sites is proceeding with rehabilitation independently with no co-ordinated regional plan. If there is a regional plan it is not visible. NSW Farmers members in this area are not aware whether the Hunter Sub-region Bio-regional Assessment Program that is currently underway as per the Federal Government Department of Environment Program correlates with the Draft Hunter Regional Plan as there is no explanation of this in the Draft Plan.

Some mines are producing woodland, others grazing land. This will probably lead to a disconnected result which will not achieve any triple bottom line results for the rehabilitation of mining land. There is little transparency evident in the reservation of offset areas which are nominally intended for the same outcome.

There is an urgent need for consultation and direction on co-ordinated rehabilitation. Mine sites such as Drayton and Integra shall shortly be in closure mode and large areas elsewhere are due for rehabilitation. Also there will be large voids left with no projected or agreed use. This planning need not be done in detail by Government as there are excellent resources available in other organisations. It does however need convening and authority from Government.

The designated land use map in Figure 18 appears confused especially around Denman. Planned uses appear to overlap resulting in indecipherable imagery. Industry and community consultation is required if prime agricultural land and industries are not being protected.

There has been significant concern raised amongst members that water assets have not been adequately addressed.

There are two facets to this concern.

The first is that there appears to be no direction as to future availability of water resources, especially high security water which would become available from the closure of the Liddell Power Station, which is slated for closure within the scope of this plan.

There also appears to be no accountability of existing water storages and the availability of supply from these over the scope of the plan.

The links to the aquifers in the area are not mentioned, and thus there is no mention of any effects on groundwater, of which agriculture relies heavily on.

Other identified issues relating to Agriculture

1. Coal extraction. World demand for coal has softened and the surge in Australian supply has seen the export price plummet. Several Hunter coal mines have stopped extracting (care and maintenance), others have drastically reduced their workforces and all companies are examining their cost structures. At the current rate of extraction some predictions report that all economically mineable coal in Australia will be gone in 50 years. The prediction is that coal mining is in terminal decline. This has been evident for two years. The plan needs to embrace how we deal with closing the mines. Some high security water would become available to the Hunter River. The downsizing will lead to a surplus of labour of all skill levels.
2. Natural gas. Particular gas companies are recently withdrawing from gas fields in NSW. Future gas production in the Hunter is at a standstill.
3. Electricity generation. In the Western Hunter area two major coal fired power stations exist. Liddell PS is now approaching 46 years old and is most unlikely to have further life extension works and has been mooted to be closed within 5 years. Bayswater PS is newer and reportedly has approximately a further 20 years life. There is planning approval for a further coal or gas PS at Bayswater. It is arguable that the economics are not there for coal and the proposed gas pipeline seems to be off the table with CSG in the area not proceeding. Any new gas powered generation would be built close to gas supplies and the bulk of consumers, i.e. the coast. Closure of Liddell would also bring a large portion of high security water back into play. There is a real opportunity to use the site for solar or renewables power generation using the transmission power lines.
4. Thoroughbred horses. This is an important industry for the Western Hunter and is a significant employer. There are already three times as many horses bred as will successfully race.
5. Viticulture. NSW Farmers members in this area would like further detail on the suitability and future of viticulture to the Hunter area. Some argue that despite its reputation, soils, humidity and pests of the area mean that the Hunter is becoming less suitable for a wine grape industry. NSW Farmers requests further information on this especially given that the Draft Hunter Plan places such a high focus on viticulture industries.
6. Agriculture. Western Hunter has been a very productive area in NSW since the 1850's. Sheep, beef, dairy, cropping and some horticulture were the lifeblood of the area until the 1970's when the pressures for land and labour for mining and power generation made farming less profitable. Logging for timber and sawmilling were also strong until easy to get logs were exhausted and conservation pressure closed the industry.

7. The NSW Government recently released a Right to Farm Policy which is to assist them in working with local councils, and the problems that arise at the peri-urban interface. It may be useful for the Draft Hunter Regional Plan to reference this document on page 40 to further assist councils in dealing with the problems that arise with potential urban encroachment.

8. Action 2.1.2 (page 29) – there is a clear focus on managing the impacts of agriculture, whereas the document should provide for the protection and promotion of valuable agricultural lands of the area.

Summary

The draft plan as presented does not adequately address the future or make proactive analysis of a land use plan for the area. There are large and real challenges ahead for the region as coal extraction potentially significantly winds down. The draft plan fails to recognise this and could be a much better document by laying the groundwork and general infrastructure for other activities and industries to pick up where extractive industries have left off, according to the best use for the different areas and the protection of the natural environment for the future.