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**[BERRIGAN SHIRE COUNCIL  
SUBMISSION: DRAFT RIVERINA  
– MURRAY REGIONAL PLAN]**

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## Introduction

The Berrigan Shire Council appreciates the opportunity to provide feedback on the draft Riverina-Murray Regional Plan firstly noting that it welcomes the development of a Regional Plan. The Council also understands that this plan is the result of consultation and feedback between a range of stakeholders and that its development and implementation is designed to facilitate economic growth, sustainable environmental management and social wellbeing in the southern New South Wales Riverina and Murray region.

In two parts this submission in the first part comments on the planning assumptions evident but not explicit in the plan presented. The second part of Council's submission reviews and comments on the Plan's goals, strategic directions, and actions.

## Part I

The principles that underpin the draft framework are in the main supported by Council as is the process of community and industry engagement described by the plan. Further, the Berrigan Shire Council and its communities welcome the Parliamentary Secretary's view that we need to plan for the future of this region. The Berrigan Shire Council's general comment is however that 'The Plan' will not drive growth or promote public and or private investment in the Riverina-Murray region.

'The Plan' is focused on 'responding' to changing economic, social and environmental circumstances rather than 'driving' 'shaping' 'creating' or even 'informing' change. External conditions always change and demand a response. Change, therefore, is not a new for rural communities exposed to global commodity pricing, the vagaries of weather and now variation in climate on agricultural production.

Rural communities need regional governance and a regional plan that does more than respond to external circumstance. 'The Plan' is a strategic planning tool used by all levels of government and business to inform investment decisions. It describes the location of future development, critical infrastructure and land-use types throughout the region. From the perspective of the Berrigan Shire Council, 'The Plan' does not promote whole-of-region regional governance, or encourage or support investment in the growth potential of the region' agribusiness productivity outside of peri-urban Wagga Wagga, Griffith or Albury.

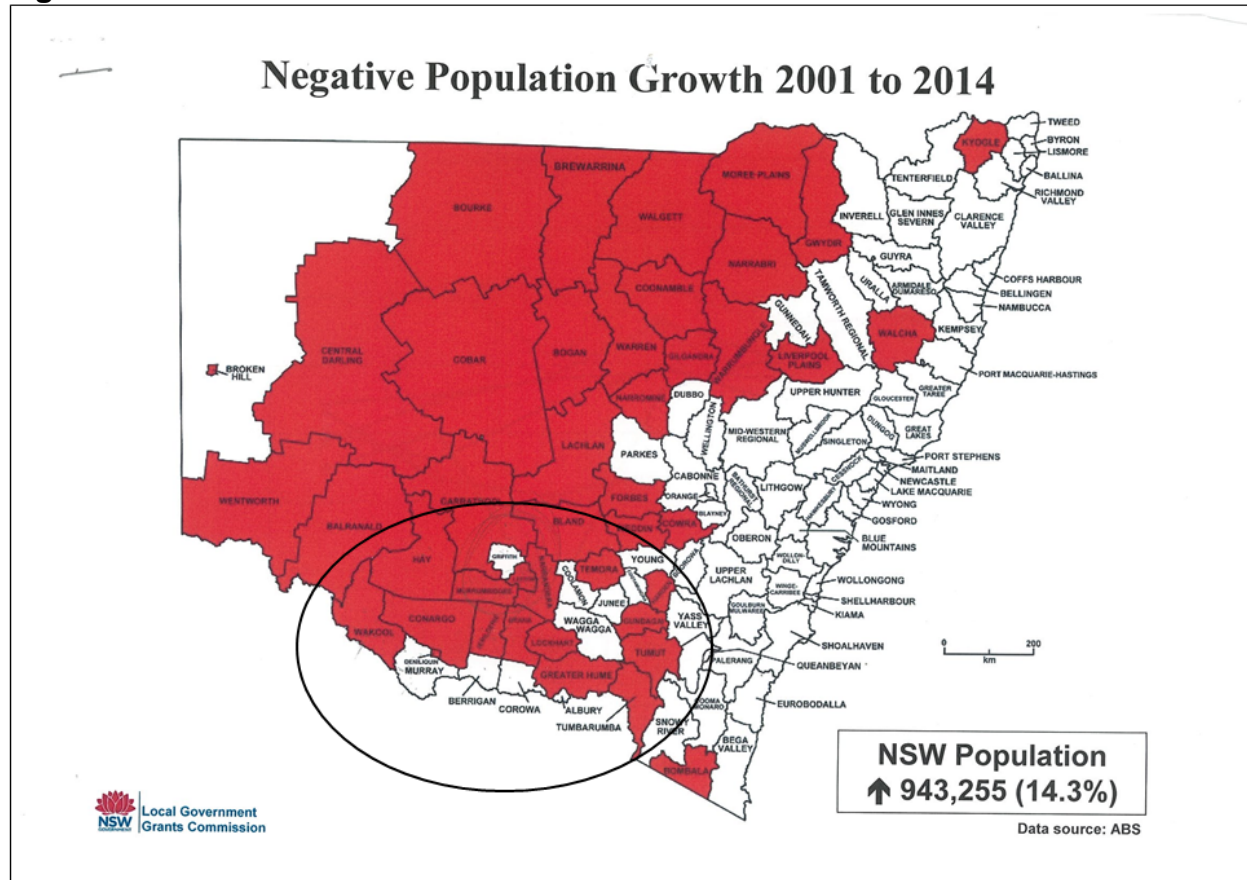
'The Plan' does not recognise the unique to the region, economic drivers and social 'push/pull' factors. Reinforcing the Council's view, that 'The Plan' is characterised by its lack of:

- Rigour – evident in the lack of localised information or credence given to local knowledge in regional plans developed by the Department: local knowledge and

intelligence provided to the Department about the influence of endogenous economic and social push/pull factors critical for the establishment of successful regional governance, regional planning and economic growth.

Figure 1 gives an overview of the demography of the NSW and the Riverina-Murray region. Notably, Murray River LGAs continue to experience population growth – as do the regional cities of Wagga Wagga, Albury, and Griffith: suggesting that local economic and social/push-pull factors operate in these locations.

**Figure 1**



For example, the city of Wagga Wagga with or without investment in major services and facilities will, in the foreseeable future, continue to grow because within the region it has not only achieved critical mass. It is also a defence and university town. While ever the Commonwealth Government maintains its military and tertiary education sector investment in Wagga Wagga it is probable that Wagga Wagga with sound 'planning' within established frameworks should continue to grow and attract investment albeit at a slower pace than is likely to occur without actions that promote regional city growth.

Albury also is the 'gateway to NSW' on the Hume Highway. Wodonga in Victoria also bolsters its critical mass. It is a higher order regional service centre with health, education, logistics, social services, and construction industries. It too given its location

on the Hume Highway between Sydney and Melbourne will continue to grow and generate endogenous economic activity. Like Wagga Wagga, Albury with sound local 'planning' within established NSW Planning Frameworks should continue to grow and attract investment.

Griffith, on the other hand, does not have the atypical advantages or the critical mass that characterise Wagga Wagga and Albury. It is arguably a typical NSW regional service centre for the agribusinesses and the small towns in its peri-urban catchments. But it too, like Wagga Wagga and Albury is not a typical NSW regional city. It like most of the most of the Riverina-Murray is oriented to Victoria for value-added processing of its agricultural product, and ready access to global commodity markets.

The competitiveness of the region, in particular, the Murray River region, is supported by a complex web and for the most part an opaque network of people acting through established social relationships, communities, firms, and non-market organisations that take comparative advantage of the region's proximity to Victoria. A phenomenon recognised by the Regional Australia Institute's competitiveness index<sup>1</sup>.

Therefore sound regional planning for Griffith, Wagga Wagga, Albury and the region more broadly should advocate for continued investment by government and other agencies in infrastructure, services, facilities and industrial activities. Activities and investment that will maintain and enhance the competitiveness of the region relative to Victorian competitors and which promote the region's accessibility to global markets via the Port of Melbourne. This most basic planning assumption and its premise are missing from 'The Plan'.

Instead, the Plan's 'growth' actions assume that 'investment in major services, facilities, and industrial activities will drive growth in the regional cities of Wagga Wagga, Griffith and Albury. And, in doing so, growth in these centres will distribute the benefits across the wider Riverina-Murray region (Planning and Environment, 2016) an approach that may be appropriate for 'typical' NSW regional cities (Dubbo, Orange, Bathurst) and the rural communities serviced by these cities.

The Berrigan Shire Council would argue based on Figures 1 & 2 – 'that there is no evidence to suggest that investment in the region's three regional cities will distribute benefits across the wider Riverina-Murray region. Figure 2 with annotations describes the functional relationship of freight, road and existing rail connections between Victoria and the region's regional cities, towns, and villages. 'The Plan' aims to accelerate growth in peri-urban Wagga Wagga, Griffith, and Albury an area indicated (Figure 2) by the concentric circles.

It does not establish a framework for growth or maintenance of the productivity of 'the rural lands and natural resources [that] are the foundations of the region's economic growth, employment, and development' (Planning and Environment, 2016, p. 17) the shaded area in Figure 2. It also does not seek to maintain the regional competitiveness

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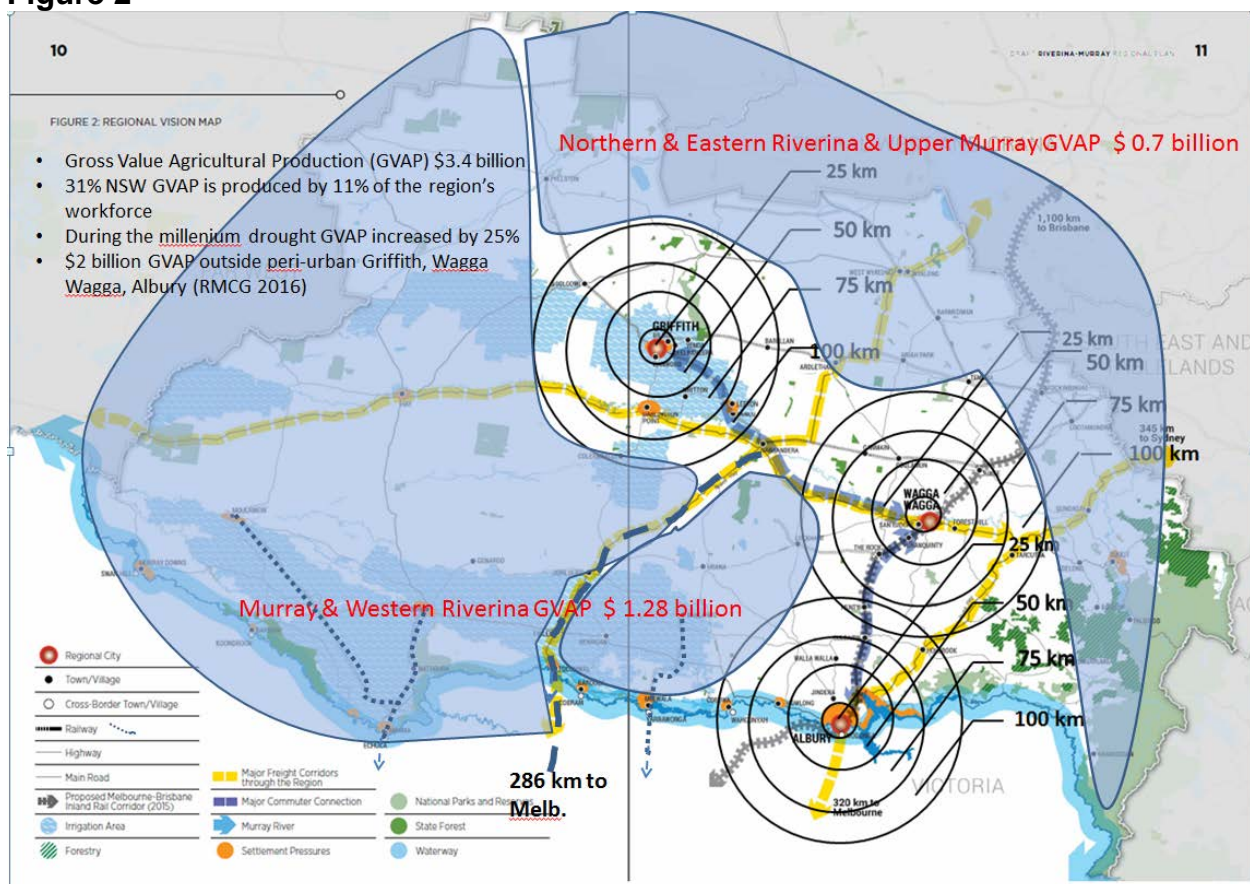
<sup>1</sup> <http://www.regionalaustralia.org.au/home/tools-and-products/insight/>

and hence growth of central Murray River localities of the former Corowa (now Federation Shire), Berrigan Shire, and the ex-Murray Shire (now Murray River Shire) via investment in services, facilities, and industrial activities.

If 'the Plan' is designed to target locales and in doing so leverage more growth based on existing strengths – it fails. The Plan does not facilitate the historically evident growth potential (Figure 1) of the Murray River Shire and Berrigan Shires' which fall outside peri-urban Albury and Wagga Wagga. These communities are freight and logistic gateways to Victoria: presenting investment opportunities for business associated with the Murray and Western Riverina's (\$1.3 billion) agricultural industry. We need a 'Plan' that supports and promotes value-added investment in agricultural productivity, transport, logistics, and food processing.

The Plan's 'structural analysis' of urban-peri urban landscapes and responsiveness to changing political, social, economic and environmental resource management issues is appropriate for the urban-peri urban and rural landscapes functionally connected and oriented to Wagga Wagga, Griffith or Albury.

**Figure 2**



It is not appropriate for the region's rural lands nor will it drive growth in the region's industries and communities connected functionally and structurally to Victoria.

To drive growth through investment in the infrastructure, industries and services needed by Murray and Western Riverina communities The Plan's actions need to:

1. Protect primary producers access to productive water.
2. Actively promote investment in technologies that promote sustainable use of water.
3. Support an increase in primary producers and agribusiness access to productive water.
4. Prioritise and coordinate the delivery of infrastructure projects that increase the productive capacity of the region's agribusiness.
5. Promote investment in infrastructure projects and services that increase on the VIC/NSW border the competitiveness of NSW business.
6. Facilitate investment in infrastructure projects and services that increase on the VIC/NSW border the competitiveness and liveability of NSW towns and villages.
7. Use Planning provisions where possible and appropriate to protect NSW business/residents on the NSW/VIC border from anti-competitive pricing anomalies for gas supplied from Victoria.
8. Actively promote investment in technologies that promote sustainable use of water.
9. Protect the Tocumwal Intermodal and adjacent land and access from the encroachment of incompatible land uses.

Part II of Council's submission follows. It is a review of the strategic utility of the Plan's Goals and associated actions particularly, commenting on its usefulness as a tool for active promotion of the Murray and Western Riverina region's competitiveness and locational advantages. A key consideration for all levels of government, business and private investors charged with making decisions about the likely growth prospects and competitiveness of a region or location.

## Part II

### Goal 1 – A growing economy supported by productive agriculture and sustainable use of resources.

According to the *Riverina Murray Agricultural Industries Final Report* (2016) commissioned by the Department the area covered by 'The Plan' (115,096 km<sup>2</sup>) is 14.6% of the land mass of NSW of which 91,000 km<sup>2</sup> is privately owned productive agricultural land. This Report notes that 'the continued success of agriculture will be vital to the growth prospects of the region. Planning should facilitate ongoing agricultural productivity and encourage investment in the value chain' (RMCG, 2016, p. 17).

The Berrigan Shire Council is very concerned that 'The Plan's coupling of agriculture and sustainable use of natural resources (Goal 1) will not facilitate 'ongoing agricultural productivity and encourage investment in the value chain'. This position reflects the Council's concern that when a 'Plan action' is about Agriculture, it is framed in 'The Plan' as a '*statement of intent*' whereas an action related to sustainable use of natural resources is more likely to be a *commitment*.

Moreover, when an agricultural action is framed positively it is not contextually relevant to the region. For example, **Action 1.3.3** 'Avoid urban expansion and rural development on productive agricultural land and identified mineral and energy resources'. This action makes no strategic sense given Figure 17 in the Draft Plan' illustrates that the location of settlement pressures within the Riverina-Murray Region *is not* at the interface of the region's productive agricultural land but the interface of land with high environmental values.

Where are 'The Plan' actions that send a strong message to agribusiness and associated value adding industries that the Riverina-Murray Regional Plan is a framework that will do more than *identify* and *encourage*?

The Berrigan Shire Council's submission is that it the Plan's actions need to *expedite*, *manage* and *protect* resources and develop infrastructure that is *critical* for growth in agri-business and associated industry productivity. There are no plan actions that *protect* primary producers' access to productive water, *increase* primary producers' access to productive water, *prioritise* and *coordinate* the delivery of infrastructure increasing the productive capacity of the region's agribusiness, etc.?

The message for potential investors, banks and developers, current agriculture and agribusiness in the Riverina-Murray Region is clear. Namely, despite generating 30% of NSW gross agricultural product, agri-business and associated industries either do not warrant or will not be given the same certainty in the Riverina-Murray regional planning



framework as an extractive mineral and energy industry related business or potential extractive mineral and energy related business.

## **Goal 2 Improved regional transport networks and utility infrastructure to support economic activity**

The focus in 'the Plan' on improving and coordinating regional transport and utility infrastructure recognises the significant work undertaken in this 'space'.

The Berrigan Council's observation is that the language used makes it clear that this Goal and supporting actions and commentary for regional transport networks and utility infrastructure applies to residents, business and economic activity in the region's urban and peri-urban industrial areas. Reflecting, in part, planning for an inland freight rail route through Wagga Wagga.

The Berrigan Shire Council would argue there are few if any benefits that will accrue for Murray and Western Riverina agricultural and future or potential extractive mineral industries from an inland freight rail route through Wagga Wagga.

Its preferred option is an inland rail route that connects the Port of Melbourne using existing rail lines or rail line reserves (Shepparton/Tocumwal/Narrandera/Parkes which in turn would provide a transcontinental (Parkes/Adelaide/Perth) rail link for the Riverina – Murray region.

This route the Council would argue is superior because it would not only increase line capacity through the use of double-stacked containers it will also provide a viable freight option for Victorian commodities requiring transport to Adelaide or Perth. Consideration of this option in a regional Plan will also assist Newell Highway towns and communities balance the competing pressures of improved regional transport networks and liveability. An issue that will impact Newell Highway towns and communities which, (based on conservative estimates) will experience, in the next 15 years an 80% growth in high productivity freight vehicles.

Of further concern to Council is the Plan's commentary re the cost of extending and upgrading utility infrastructure and services to 'remote areas'. The Plan's message is that enhancement of the region's freight network or coordination of utility infrastructure delivery is centred on the peri-urban catchments of Wagga Wagga, Albury and Griffith.

Where are the Plan actions that recognise that agricultural productivity; the uptake of new farm technologies and 'on-farm or neighbouring town processing growth' is constrained by poor access to energy and telecommunications technology?

The 'Plan's minimisation of the energy and telecommunications needs of the agricultural industry and agri-business adds to the message throughout the Plan that rural communities are valued and valuable so long as the rural community is prepared to

adapt and be resilient. The corollary of which is that rural communities that are not resilient are so because the community did not respond and adjust to the political, social and economic environment.

Given the Plan is designed to promote growth in the region's economy: an economy underpinned by agriculture and sustainable use of natural resources the 'business as usual actions' that do not address the deficiencies inherent in the delivery to remote and not so remote areas of energy and telecommunications infrastructure is disappointing and short sighted.

### **Goal 3 – Strong regional cities supported by a network of liveable towns and villages that meet the community's changing needs**

This goal and supporting actions will contribute toward the development of strong regional cities supported by the towns and villages in the peri-urban catchment of Albury, Griffith and Wagga Wagga. The Berrigan Shire Council notes that many of the actions that support this Goal involve NSW government agencies: health, education, housing, etc.

The concern for the Berrigan Shire Council is that NSW Government organisations operating outside a regional city are not funded and therefore have no capacity to work with or partner with the proposed Joint Organisations on Goal 3 actions in the region's smaller towns and villages.

That 'the Plan' has not identified the issue of social housing and the quality of social housing and rental housing stock in the region's small towns and villages is of concern to the Council. Professionals that work in the region on medium term contracts experience difficulty accessing an almost non-existent rental property market and often cannot secure housing that offers the level of amenity required to retain their services.

The final direction for this Goal is particularly relevant to the Berrigan Shire Council. Direction 3.5 'Enhance connections and planning between cross-border communities to improve service quality and infrastructure delivery'. The Plan suggests that the NSW government will 'investigate' barriers, enablers of economic, housing and jobs growth. Arguably this investigation has already been undertaken by the cross-border Commissioner. Given, it is five years since the establishment of the Cross-border Commissioner's Office a 20-year Regional Plan should, by now, include actions that are more than 'business as usual' investigations.

The Berrigan Shire Council currently works with its neighbouring Victorian Council – sharing resources and service delivery – waste, tourism marketing and promotion, joint industry-based economic development projects. Further, the Berrigan Shire Council commissioned in 2013 economic modelling that looked at the growth of an Age Care Industry cluster and the economic benefits of an expanding social services sector. It

found that by 2030 more health and social services will be delivered and accessed by NSW residents in Victoria.

Not because the services are not currently in NSW but because growth in the Victorian regional towns and cities (Shepparton, Benalla, Yarrawonga, Cobram, Echuca) that functionally and structurally support Murray communities will attract new investment and in doing so reduce the competitiveness of services delivered in NSW border communities. Unless we use our locational advantages – liveability to retain or establish services in NSW that offer employment or services to both Victorian and NSW residents and business.

We need a draft Plan that markets and promotes (in NSW and Victoria) the competitiveness and liveability of cross-border communities. We need a Plan, which sends a message that the NSW government will drive economic growth and investment in its cross-border communities – outside of Albury-Wodonga.

Therefore, ‘The Plan’ should investigate how NSW planning provisions can and should be used to create, in a cross-border context, a competitive and attractive environment for business and key industry growth sectors: social services, logistics and construction.

#### **Goal 4 – A protected environment and a community resilient to natural hazards and climate change**

The Council's position is that the coupling of environmental protection, natural hazards and climate change with community resilience will not achieve the desired outcome. Community resilience is about how communities respond and adapt to a range of internal and external shocks ‘economic, social, policy, and environmental’.

The Plan's coupling of environmental protection with community resilience suggests that if negative impacts on a rural community are foreseeable due to policy actions taken to protect the environment and or respond to climate change events that the affected community is responsible for building its resilience and adapting to this change. The Berrigan Shire Council agrees that the NSW Government and Councils’ have a role in protecting the environment and the community through the use of planning controls that reduce community exposure to hazards.

However, it is hard to see how reducing a community's exposure to future environmental protections/hazards, and not current environmental protections and or environmental hazards will build community resilience.

Similarly ‘the Plan’ suggests that the people who live and work in the region: the Murray River farmer, tourist operator, and the businesses in our towns will not be consulted or involved in the development of the Waterfront Management Strategy. The Council appreciates that it is the intention of the NSW government to work with Councils to deliver this strategy. The Berrigan Shire Council's submission is that the NSW

government should also work with Councils and local communities in the preparation of this Strategy.

## **Conclusion**

The Council's submission is that the draft Riverina – Murray Regional Plan will not in a region functionally and structurally oriented to Victoria:

1. Drive growth and employment.
2. Facilitate private investment in the region's (\$1.3 billion) Murray and Western Riverina agricultural industry, nor the broader Murray and Western Riverina's towns and villages.

To drive growth in central Murray and Western Riverina communities The Plan's actions need to include:

1. Protect primary producers' access to productive water.
2. Actively promote investment in technologies that promote sustainable use of water.
3. Support an increase in primary producers and agribusiness access to productive water.
4. Prioritise and coordinate the delivery of infrastructure projects that increase the productive capacity of the region's agribusiness.
5. Promote investment in infrastructure projects and services that increase on the VIC/NSW border the competitiveness of NSW business.
6. Facilitate investment in infrastructure projects and services that increase on the VIC/NSW border the competitiveness and liveability of NSW towns and villages.
7. Use planning provisions where possible and appropriate to protect NSW business/residents on the NSW/VIC border from anti-competitive pricing anomalies for gas supplied from Victoria.
8. Actively promote investment in technologies that promote sustainable use of water.
9. Protect the Tocumwal Intermodal and adjacent land and access from the encroachment of incompatible land uses.

Further, to facilitate private investment in the region's agri-business sector and associated service industries. The Berrigan Shire Council's submission is that 'The Plan' fails to recognise the important strategic role a 'Regional Plan' has in promoting regional governance and planning for regional competitiveness. Namely, in the context of contemporary regional or local governance 'Regional Plans' are used to promote a region or locale to current and future investors, state, commonwealth, and the private sector.

The Berrigan Shire Council's position is that this Plan sends a message to potential investors, other levels of government, business and residents that the NSW government believes that the Murray and Riverina Region's 'outlook' is limited. Further, this is demonstrated by a 'vision' that does not view change or proximity to Victoria as an opportunity.

The Plan's message, therefore, to potential investors, is that the Riverina-Murray region is:

- A region where growth in regional cities will be encouraged and supported by a planning framework designed to facilitate investment.

While, outside of Albury, Wagga Wagga and Griffith 'the draft Regional Plan' will:

- Prioritise environmental protection at the expense of agriculture.
- Limit investment in the productive use of water resources.
- Plan for the potential development of the region's extractive mineral resources and industries.

The Berrigan Shire Council's submission is that these messages reduce the competitiveness (compared to their Victorian counterparts) of Murray and Western Riverina agri-business: and, in doing so, the sustainability of the Murray and Western Riverina's towns and villages.

## References

- Planning and Environment. (2016). *Draft Riverina Murray Regional Plan* . Sydney: NSW Government.
- RMCG. (2016). *Riverina Murray Agricultural Industries (Final Report)*. Bendigo: Department of Planning and Environment.