



# Response to Draft Riverina Murray Regional Plan

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July 2016

**Riverina Eastern Regional Organisation of Councils**  
**RESPONSE TO**  
**DRAFT RIVERINA MURRAY REGIONAL PLAN**

**Introduction**

The Riverina Eastern Regional Organisation of Councils (REROC) is a voluntary association of 9 General Purpose councils and two county councils. The member councils of REROC are Bland, Coolamon, Greater Hume, Gundagai, Junee, Lockhart, Snowy Valleys, Temora, Wagga Wagga and Goldenfields and Riverina Water County Councils.

Our members are pleased to note the change of name from Murrumbidgee Murray to Riverina Murray Regional Plan, we believe the use of the descriptor Riverina Murray (“the Region”) is more in keeping with the terminology that is generally used to describe the region covered by the Plan.

In preparing this submission we have consulted with our members and in particular the Planning Technical Committee.

***Vision***

While we appreciate that this is a predominately a land use plan, we believe that the vision for the region is not sufficiently aspirational. The vision is a “business as usual” approach for the Region and one which does not adequately reflect the growth that could potentially occur. Our members would prefer a vision that recognises the diversity of the Region’s economy and that looks to identify and harness opportunities for growth.

Our Region is one of Australia’s great food bowls, its clean, green image has been utilised by multiple companies to build enormously successful export businesses. It is a region that is dynamic, diverse and resilient that has a reputation for collaboration between all the tiers of government. The Region has the assets and the drivers for significant growth and we believe that the vision should recognise this. The vision sets the tone for Plan so it is vitally important that it represents the aspirations that the people who live in the region have for the Region.

We agree with the statement that the Region “will be an appealing place to live, work and invest”, however we are concerned that the Plan fails to mention the need for arts, cultural and recreational facilities and services that are key to attracting and retaining residents. It is important that communities have access to facilities that support arts, culture and recreation and they need to be planned for. The region is served by a dynamic arts community with nationally recognised arts’ organisations and practitioners living and working here. Sport and recreational activities are extremely important to community wellbeing and should be included in the vision.

We are particularly concerned that the vision singles out the Murray River, the vision should encompass all the rivers in the region – the Murrumbidgee, Lachlan and Tumut. We believe all our waterways should be “actively managed and valued as an asset by residents and visitors alike”. The failure to address all rivers undermines the validity of the Plan and relegates these important waterways to second class status. There has long been a concern that the Tumut and Murrumbidgee Rivers were just glorified channels for the Murrumbidgee and Coleambally Irrigation Areas, the

failure to recognise these rivers as the valuable regional assets appears to add credence to these concerns.

We note that Plan's assumptions in relation to falling populations and wish to once again raise the conflict that appears to arise between the population projections that are occurring at State level and those that are occurring locally. Councils firmly believe that the projections that are being determined locally better reflect on-ground activities in the LGA while the State figures, which consistently indicate falling populations for many country LGAs, do not adequately account for these activities.

We are concerned that State planning decisions are informed by these projections and as a consequence some LGAs may lose services or facilities based on an indication that populations are falling. We believe that it is imperative that data upon which planning for the Region is based is shared by all parties and that it is an accurate reflection of activities within the Region.

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

While agriculture is very important to this Region, it is not the Region's only economic driver. Goal One is the only over-arching economic goal contained in the Plan and as such it is voiced far too narrowly. We would prefer an economic goal that better recognises the region's diversity, for example "A Growing and Diverse Economy that Harnesses the Region's Competitive Advantages". A broad goal of this nature would then set the tone for a strategy that adequately addressed the many growth opportunities that exist across the Riverina Murray.

While our members recognise that agriculture is the headline act in relation to Gross Regional Product, this focus on agriculture ignores the fact that while productivity is growing in the sector, jobs are not. Increasing use of technology and the aggregation of farms has undoubtedly increased productivity but it has had a negative impact on job growth. If our Region wants job growth then it must diversify.

The Plan identifies that in Wagga Wagga the sector with the highest employment is health, further the Plan identifies that region has an aging demographic – our members argue that these two factors clearly come together to create the potential for growth in the provision of health and other forms of care for the aging population.

Similarly the Region is home to the Hume, Newell, Olympic, Sturt and Mid-western Highways – almost every heavy vehicle travelling between Sydney and Melbourne, Sydney and Adelaide and Melbourne and Brisbane travel through the region, yet Freight and Logistics is not mentioned as a growth area. The growth of intermodal hubs at Albury, Wagga Wagga, Junee, Leeton, Griffith and potentially Cootamundra clearly demonstrate that the Region has a competitive advantage in this area.

The Plan needs to better address the potential for forestry and the growth in timber related product manufacturing. We believe that given the size and influence the industry has in an economic context within our Region that an Action that specifically addresses Forestry should also be included in the Plan.

While we appreciate that the size of the Region, at over 114,000 sq kilometres means that it is difficult to find one industry upon which to focus, it is our belief that it is this very diversity that makes the Region strong and resilient. It is for this reason that a planning document of this scale should recognise that the Region's economic future is more than just agriculture.

Therefore, we would like to see Goal One contain Directions that aim to harness the Region's competitive advantages to generate economic growth. The Directions and Actions as currently stated mainly focus on agriculture, which is too narrow an approach. To that end we believe that Direction 1.1 should read "Grow the economic potential and diversity of the Region" which would allow more Actions that addressed, promoted and supported the economic diversity.

We note that the Illawarra Shoalhaven plan identified Priority Growth Sectors in that region. We believe that the Riverina Murray Plan should do the same. Our members believe that the following areas should have been identified as Priority Growth Sectors:

- *Tourism and the Visitor Economy* – changes to the Tourism NSW have resulted in a single Riverina Murray Destination Network. The Region has many tourism assets that are and can be harnessed to drive growth opportunities. The Region includes Mt Kosciuszko National Park and the Mt Selwyn snowfields, the cold climate wineries in Tumbarumba and Tumut as well as the wineries in the MIA, river based tourism on the Murrumbidgee and Murray, fishing on the Tumut River. There are opportunities for food and fibre-style experiences across the region as it is one of Australia's great food bowls. In addition the Region is home to the National Art Glass collection at Wagga Wagga, the Murray Art Museum Albury (MAMA), Griffith hosts the biennial National Contemporary Jewellery Award, Shear Outback at Hay captures the essence of rural living, while the Temora Aviation Museum attracts many thousands of visitors to its showcase days. The major highways that dissect the Region bring hundreds of thousands of visitors every year.
- *Health and Aged Care* – there has been significant public and private investment in health and aged care facilities across the region. The Wagga Wagga Rural Referral Hospital has recently been completed and is expected to attract more health care specialists to the Riverina. The Region recognises that its demographic is aging and consequently this is creating growth opportunities for the development of care alternatives. In addition Charles Sturt University (CSU) is offering a diverse range of courses in health care including dentistry, nursing, physiotherapy, occupational therapy, medical science, and radiography. Graduates of these courses often want to stay in the Region and consequently there are growth opportunities that will be created through the employment of skilled graduates. There are two medical schools currently operating: UNSW Rural Medical School and Notre Dame Medical School while CSU is currently seeking approval to introduce a third school. Kurrajong Waratah specialises in the provision of early intervention for babies and young children with learning, intellectual and physical disabilities.
- *Education and Training* – the education sector is growing in the region. CSU has campuses at Albury, Wagga Wagga and Griffith. The Campus at Griffith is shared with Riverina TAFE. Riverina TAFE has 29 campuses located within the region, offering face-to-face and on-line courses. The EH Graham Centre works collaboratively with CSU and the Department of Primary Industry on cutting edge research in agriculture. While CSU's Veterinary School is

recognised for its expertise in large animal care. In addition Regional Express has recently established a pilot training school at the Wagga Wagga City Airport site.

- *Defence* – Wagga Wagga is home to the army, navy and airforce. Kapooka Army Base is the recruit training facility for all non-officer entrants into the Army. RAAF Wagga delivers technical and non-technical initial employment and postgraduate training that is fundamental to the delivery of military air and space power. Since 1993, Navy personnel have been undertaking aviation Initial Technical Training at the RAAF School of Technical Training based at the RAAF Base Wagga.
- *Manufacturing including agri-business* – there are a substantial number of manufacturing enterprises in the Region, many based around agri-business and forestry. The Region's vast agriculture output makes it a logical choice for any enterprise that wants to manufacture food, beverages, timber or fibre products. In addition Wagga Wagga is building a reputation for resource recovery industries with Renewed Metal Technologies and Southern Oils both operating manufacturing enterprises. Growth in manufacturing also leads to a growth in the businesses that support those enterprises for instance light engineering and transport.
- *Freight and Logistics* - virtually all freight that is travelling from Sydney to Melbourne, Sydney to Adelaide and Melbourne to Brisbane passes through the Region. The importance of the Region in terms of freight is reflected by the number of freight and logistics businesses that are already operating or are in the planning. Intermodal Freight Hubs are operating at Ettamogah (Albury), Harefield (Junee), Wumbulgal (Leeton), Widgelli (Griffith) and are planned for Wagga Wagga (Riverina Intermodal Freight Hub) and Cootamundra. In addition the establishment of the Inland Rail which will dissect the Region should increase growth opportunities for the sector.
- *Mining and Resources* – opportunities exist for more mining and resource activities in the region. Evolution Mining, Argent Minerals, Sandfire Minerals and Thomson Mining are all operating or looking to operate in the West Wyalong area and there is extensive exploration taking place across the LGA. Macquarie Gold has all the licences required to mine at Adelong. The owners of the Ardlethan Tin Mine are currently in discussions to reopen part of its operations and there are vast resources of brown coal in Oaklands.
- *Agriculture and Horticulture* – the value of agriculture has already been identified in the Plan however we believe that it would benefit from a stronger emphasis on horticultural enterprises which require very different planning arrangements to broad acre farming.
- *Forestry* – as with horticulture we believe that forestry should be singled out in the Plan. It is a significant and growing industry in the Region's east which requires special land use arrangements to accommodate its needs. There are opportunities for forestry activities to expand beyond its traditional operational areas and this is already occurring on a small scale.

We believe that the inclusion of the above Priority Growth Sectors would enhance the Plan and allow it to have a greater impact on growth in the Region.

We note that the Plan states that the “NSW Government will require councils to adequately address agricultural production issues such as water supply, waste management, biosecurity risks, energy needs, quality transport routes and intensive agricultural production systems in local planning strategies”. The majority of these issues are in fact within the State’s jurisdiction and not local governments’ powers. We are concerned that such statements raise expectations that these issues are within a council’s control when clearly they are not. If these important issues are to be successfully addressed it will only be through genuine collaboration between the State, local government, State-owned enterprises like Essential Energy and private enterprise.

We note with some concern the suggestion that councils prepare Biosecurity Plans. Biosecurity is the primary responsibility of Local Land Services and the DPI, consequently those agencies work together to prepare comprehensive regional biosecurity plans. Councils being required to do the same would be duplication of effort. We believe that it is important throughout the Plan that councils are not directed to undertake activities that are the responsibility of State agencies. It is more important that State agencies genuinely consult and collaborate with local government to ensure that any regional planning that takes place appropriately addresses the land use planning issues for which councils are responsible.

Correspondence received earlier this year from the NSW Planning Minister had advised that developments that conflicted with agricultural land use, in particular mining, would be addressed in this Plan, however this does not appear to have occurred. The Plan states that the value of high productivity agricultural land “must be considered when determining the relative merits of coal and coal seam gas extraction”. We note however that there is no guidance on how this should be done and what, if anything, the Government plans to do when an exploration licence has been granted over high productivity agricultural land. In addition this statement appears to be at odds with Action 1.3.2 where councils will be required to “protect areas of mineral and extractive and renewable energy potential through land use zoning in land environment plans”. The issue that needs to be addressed is what happens when those areas intersect with high productivity agricultural land, which one is the winner?

The Plan raises the issue of pressure being placed on the region’s water resources by population settlement and growth. Our members agree that one of the issues of vital importance in this discussion is the need to determine what constitutes “essential human consumption” from a water resourcing perspective. In addition consideration needs to be given as to how water will be sourced for industries that are heavy water uses – taking the water from urban water reserves can negatively impact on water supplies however purchasing permanent water on the open market is very expensive.

Rural residential land is a growth area for many councils. More people are seeking the benefits of rural living, therefore the demand for this type of housing is increasing. In addition retiring farmers, moving to town are often attracted to rural residential living as a “transition” step in downsizing. It is important that councils are able to meet demands for this type of housing. This may mean that the only way a council can supply this type of housing is through rezoning of agricultural land, Action 1.3.3 seems to place a handbrake on this type of development. We would suggest rather than a blanket negative response to this issue, councils should be able to consult with their communities and the DPE about re-zoning of the land to determine whether the community will be better-off overall as a result of it taking place.

Finally we believe that any Actions contained in the Plan that have an economic growth outcome should be included in this section of the Plan and not be spread across the Plan, for example Direction 3.2 deals with economic prosperity and Direction 3.3 economic self-determination, they should both appear under Goal One.

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

As the DPE is aware REROc has undertaken considerable work on Freight Transport planning in the Region and we are strongly committed to developing an integrated road and rail network that supports the efficient and effective transport of freight to and from our Region.

It is important that all the regional routes of significance are identified in the Plan. Therefore we believe that the maps on page 11 and page 44 should include the Mid-western, Olympic and Snowy Mountains highways as well as the Burley Griffin Way, Goldfields Way and the Gocup Road.

Local, regional and State roads must be able to meet the freight task not just for today but for the rest of the century. We note therefore with some concern that Action 2.1.3 mentions only local roads, this ignores the important role that regional roads have in the freight task. This Action could be improved with the addition of “regional roads”, we note that there is no mention of regional roads in the Plan and we believe that is a significant oversight.

REROc supports the establishment of the Inland Rail route through Culcairn, Henty, Wagga Wagga and then north through Stockinbingal to Brisbane. We believe the service will provide additional growth opportunities for businesses across the region.

The Plan has not discussed the challenges of energy in any detail, we believe that this is a serious oversight. Access to energy infrastructure at a reasonable price is a significant barrier to growth in the region. At every forum or platform at our disposal, REROc has consistently raised access to energy infrastructure. Our members are aware of businesses that have built on a Greenfield site, who as the first developer have been forced to meet the total cost of the energy infrastructure including transformers which then become the property of Essential Energy. Essential Energy then place new users on that infrastructure and continue to do so until it reaches capacity. If the first developer then decides to expand their operations it may find that capacity on the infrastructure that the business purchased initially is exhausted and consequently Essential Energy will demand that they pay for the expansion. This process is a disincentive to businesses becoming the first developer, because the costs of energy infrastructure are so much higher.

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

This section of the Plan needs to better recognise the interdependency of regional cities, towns and villages. In order for regional cities to be strong, towns and villages in the region the city services must also be strong and vice versa. One cannot prosper without the other.

We note that the Action in relation to Industrial Land development contained within Direction 3.1 “Grow the Regional Cities of Albury, Wagga Wagga and Griffith” relates only to those cities. Regional towns also need industrial land with access to services that can be connected a reasonable cost. It

often makes better business sense to locate agri-business manufacturing as close as possible to the feedstock the processor requires and this may mean establishing in a regional town rather than a regional city. The Plan seems to ignore the potential for growth in these areas.

Direction 3.3 is the catch-all for regional towns and villages and states that “diversifying the economy and growing skills across the region will be important for future growth and prosperity”. Our members agree with this assessment and therefore are disappointed that the Plan does not include any Actions that address that goal. In addition we believe that the Plan would be better served if every action that addressed economic growth was included in Goal One. Action 3.2.3 talks about diversifying regional tourism markets, this more properly belongs in Goal One. In addition we believe the focus on tourism is too narrow, it seems to indicate the only future for regional towns lies in tourism and this is incorrect.

We note that Action 3.2.1 talks about the need to develop capacity building tools and further that JOs will have a role in this. While it is important to note that JOs will have a role to play in regional planning and intergovernmental collaboration, it is vital to recognise that JOs do not service communities, councils do.

JOs are member-based organisations, funded 100% by the member councils, therefore the JO is subservient to its member councils. Councils have communities, JOs have member councils. While the legislation for JOs is still some way off, it is clear that the basic framework is in place and therefore any demands placed on JOs by the Plan should properly reflect the JO’s likely operating environment. We do not see JOs working directly with communities rather they will work through their member councils.

In addition the core functions of a JO are regional planning, intergovernmental collaboration and advocacy and lobbying. Activities such as resource sharing are viewed by the Office of Local Government as optional activities and whether any will be undertaken by JOs will depend on a JO’s structure, its funding profile and ultimately what the member councils want the JO to do.

We agree that communities can build their resilience by having a skilled workforce and that TAFE is a lynchpin in providing those skills. However, over the last 5 years TAFE in this Region has significantly downgraded its services, and is now offering many of its courses on-line or via video link. In addition some apprenticeship training has been centralised and is now only offered on a block release basis, which is not very attractive to small businesses who lose a staff member for weeks at a time. These actions have been taken in response to the Smart and Skilled agenda and an economic imperative to cut costs.

In regional areas these cost-cutting measures ultimately result in fewer people taking on training and those that are in training often struggle to complete their studies because of the tyranny of distance and isolation. While on-line delivery is touted as providing a flexible learning environment, it discounts the distinct learning advantages that classroom situations provide, in addition it fails to consider the isolation on-line learners often feel, which can result in non-completion of studies.

Almost 20 years ago this region was one of the first in NSW to identify that it had a skills shortage. It continues to suffer from skills shortages and our members are very concerned that without a vibrant and viable TAFE sector willing to provide face-to-face learning opportunities the shortage will only magnify. This problem needs to be more strongly addressed in the Plan.



We agree with Action 3.2.5. that inter-regional transport connections need to be improved across the Region. In the REROC region Wagga Wagga is the only community that enjoys a regular urban bus transport system. The rest of the Region cobbles together a network of school buses and Community Transport to achieve a public transport outcome.

Community Transport remains the backbone of public transport for many regional towns. It is almost always over-subscribed and consequently access is usually restricted to those with medical appointments. This becomes an issue when there are no other affordable options and as a result residents who have made the decision to age in place find that they are isolated, unable to participate in social gathering for lack of an affordable transport option. Therefore planning for affordable, senior's living becomes even more important in smaller communities as a way of addressing transport difficulties and isolation issues.

In the REROC region affordable housing is becoming more and more difficult, particularly for new-build seniors' living. The costs associated with bringing utilities to a greenfield site are so high in some cases that the final cost of the development is outside what the market will pay and cannot be considered as "affordable" housing. This is an on-going issue which many of our member councils have taken up and continue to take up with utility providers.

Our members agree that more needs to be done to provide housing for itinerant and seasonal workers, and the development of guidelines to assist and facilitate this type of housing would be useful.

We agree that further work needs to be undertaken to assist councils to deal with rural residential land development, particularly as this can be a way of addressing declining populations. In addition planning controls that allow more flexibility with regard to farm-based housing may assist in addressing the succession issue on many farms. Many farmers would like to leave their properties to their child(ren) however they then need to find the funds to move to a new home, this can prove very difficult for farmers who are traditionally asset rich and cash poor. The option to build a retirement residence on the farm may provide an "out", allowing aging parents to age in place while facilitating the transition to a younger generation of farmer.

Many of our member councils are concerned about the rise of the corporate farmer and that this is further facilitated by the inability of children to afford to pay out parents who need to move on. It is easier to sell up than it is to try and accommodate a takeover of the farm assets by the children.

In addition the Plan should recognise the importance of retaining existing State services like schools. Accessibility to services like schools are integral to the liveability of any community, if students are forced to travel many kilometres everyday to essential State services then this undermines the liveability of the community.

Finally our members are concerned that in considering liveability the Plan has failed to include any planning for arts, culture or recreational services. These types of facilities are the fabric of any town and without them no community can realistically expect to attract new residents or perhaps even retain existing ones. Clever integrated planning that allows people to live, work and play is important to the growth of any community and this should be included in the Plan.

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

Our biggest issue in this section of the Plan is its focus on the Murray River and its failure to address the other major waterways in the Region. We strongly believe that Direction 4.1 should be amended to read “Protect the Region’s significant waterways”, this would allow the Plan to discuss issues relating to the Murrumbidgee, Tumut and Lachlan rivers as well as the Murray. The Plan could then include a specific Action in relation to the Murray as well as an Action for the other three rivers.

We believe that improved access to all the waterways in the region for recreational and residential purposes would enhance liveability in the Region.

**Conclusion**

REROC welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Draft Plan and has also welcomed the number of opportunities we have been provided with over the last 18 months to provide comment on the Plan’s development.

We look forward to working constructively and in partnership with the DPE to implement the final Riverina Murray Regional Plan.