



**REGIONAL
AUSTRALIA**
INSTITUTE

**The Priorities and Research of
Non-Metropolitan Regional
Development Australia Committees**

May 2012

About the Regional Australia Institute

Thirty-two percent of Australians live in the non-metropolitan areas of Australia.

The desire for rural and coastal lifestyles, advances in communications technology and positive market conditions for industries such as mining and agriculture mean that a regional renaissance is well underway.

To take advantage of the opportunities for growth and renewal in regional Australia there is a need to challenge the status quo in regional development.

The Regional Australia Institute (RAI) is an independent, apolitical, national think tank established to conduct research into priority policy issues impacting all areas of Australia lying outside capital cities.

Our mission is to become an authoritative and trusted source of independent information and policy advice.

Using existing information, and commissioning new research, the RAI will foster an informed debate and better decision making at all levels of government.

RAI seeks independent thinking from the best brains, in Australia and the world, to find innovative solutions to difficult problems.

Ultimately, by developing and promoting new ideas and through active dialogue with regional communities, RAI will contribute to all of Australia's regions realizing their social and economic potential.

Acknowledgement

RAI was established as an independent company limited by guarantee in September 2011 with the support of the Australian Government.

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Summary

Regional Development Australia (RDA) is a national network of 55 committees made up of local leaders who work with all levels of government, business and community groups to support the development of their regions.

The Regional Australia Institute (RAI) invited non-metropolitan RDAs to provide input to the development of RAI through an on-line survey in April 2012. Thirty-six of the forty-six non-metropolitan RDAs provided input during the survey period.

The results confirm that most RDAs are focused on increasing and sustaining economic activity in their region. This manifests itself in a range of industry and workforce development priorities that reflect each regions position and potential.

In addition to local networks and knowledge, RDAs rely on government reports and online resources for information and ideas. They are much less likely to be engaged with academic literature despite the diversity of work in the space.

RDAs identify challenges in accessing good information, particularly data for their region that is up to date and linked to relevant issues. They would also value access to case studies of regional development success stories to help develop their own strategies for change.

Using the resources available to them, RDAs invest in a variety of practical research projects and there is a significant and diverse amount of work underway.

- Job creation and economic development is a big driver of research projects amongst RDAs. Work on infrastructure complements this agenda.
- Work on the role of environmental issues, energy and climate change policy in regional development is also significant.
- The allocation by governments of resources for work on specific policy issues also has an important influence on the scope of research work undertaken. The extensive work on the Murray-Darling Basin and National Broadband Network are recent examples.

The advice of RDAs to the RAI is to focus initial research on:

- Developing regional data and information
- Drivers of economic development and employment in regional areas such as the resources sector, population flows and economic diversification.
- Reviewing the implications of government policy and investment for regional areas

RDAs are seeking to engage with the RAI through forums and events. They are also keen to provide input to research RAI may undertake on priority issues.

RAI appreciates the support of RDAs in the development of the organisation. Through a combination of approaches endorsed by the survey, RAI is confident that RAI and the RDAs will be able to develop a mutually beneficial and productive working relationship.

RAI has used the results of this work to inform its research approach. RAI will engage with RDAs working on relevant issues as part of its research process.

Survey Results

The Participants

Thirty-six of forty-six non-metropolitan RDA's responded to the survey. Table 1 provides a summary of responses by state. A full list of the RDAs that participated in the survey is provided in the Appendix.

Table 1: Distribution of RDA responses by state

State	No. Invited	Responded	% of responses
NSW	13	11	31%
Victoria	5	4	11%
Queensland	11	10	28%
WA	8	5	14%
SA	7	4	11%
Tasmania	1	1	3%
NT	1	1	3%
Total	46	36	100%

The highest priority issues for non-metropolitan RDAs

Top Priorities

RDAs were asked to nominate their current top priority from amongst the various goals defined in their regional strategy.

The two highest priorities identified by the survey were economic development and infrastructure, with each being nominated by 11 RDAs as their current top priority.

Economic priorities mostly related to diversification of the regional economy and long-term economic sustainability. More than half of the committees who chose to focus on the economic development were from NSW, but this issue was identified by at least one region in every state except WA.

Infrastructure was discussed mainly in terms of transport (road and freight were provided as specific examples) and as a driver of industry development. This was focused on most heavily by NSW, as well as QLD.

Other top priorities included:

- knowledge and skill building
- decreasing unemployment
- education the environment, and
- preparing for the National Broadband Network.

While there is evidence of some diversity of top priorities amongst RDAs, there is a clear focus on economic development and employment throughout the network.

Drivers of RDA Priorities

As well as noting their current top priority, RDAs were asked to identify what made this issue the highest priority.

Many RDAs spoke about the need to diversify their economy to provide for a stable and prosperous future. This was particularly evident in those areas that are reliant on the agricultural sector as the major traditional source of economic prosperity.

The impact of the mining boom was also discussed as a contributing factor, with four regions, both from Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia, discussing the need to manage the recent growth in the resource sector.

The other most motivating factor for RDA is trying to find ways to reduce unemployment in the region. This was a priority in itself for many committees (17%) and a justification for their current focus for a further 33% of committees. When discussed in detail, regions focused on the need to improve and diversify economy, increase skills, population management and affordable housing.

The priority responses suggest that an over-riding motivation for a majority of RDAs is job creation, with a diversity of perspectives within the RDAs about the specific catalysts for change in their area and how to best approach the issue.

Sources of Information for RDAs

The survey sought to understand where RDAs got their information to support their understanding of regional issues and decision making.

The question specified that the sources should be additional to local engagement (e.g. with local government, the community, chambers of commerce) and the experience of Committee members as these are a core part of each RDAs function. Five options were provided as well as space to provide an individual response. Table 2 captures the response.

Table 2: Important sources of RDA Information

Sources of information	% of RDAs
State or Federal Government reports	83%
Academic research	33%
Self-conducted research	69%
Newspapers and print media	31%
Internet and web-based sources	72%

A number of additional answers were provided. These included:

- consultants
- peak industry body reports
- ABC Radio, and
- the Regional Studies Association.

This result indicates that RDAs rely primarily on non-academic sources of information and are not highly engaged with the range of information available from academia. This apparent disconnect between policy makers and the diversity of academic work undertaken on regional issues has been mentioned by other organisations that RAI has engaged with in recent months.

Practical data or information limitations experienced by RDAs

Accessing relevant region specific information was identified as a general challenge by most of the RDAs. There is a perceived lack of access to consistent and up to date data for the region. Several common gaps were identified by the RDAs.

The first gap is related to accessing basic knowledge about the region and the work going on in regional development.

- The Australia Bureau of Statistics was mentioned specifically as a key source, with a number of committees waiting anxiously for the result of the 2011 census to be analysed so they can update their basic data on the region.
- The absence of a database of regional projects and case studies to see what approaches other areas have utilized and how successful these have been was also noted by a number of RDAs as a gap.

Consistent with RDA priorities, the most important single area noted as challenging was employment data (noted by 31% of RDAs). RDAs also identified a lack of data and information on:

- the drivers of long-term unemployment
- skills and training
- FIFO and DIDO workers, and
- participation and employment by industry sector.

Economic information was also a key challenge (22%). More data required in areas such as:

- productivity
- projections
- business viability, and
- size and production of regional industries.

There was significant interest in developing a Gross Regional Product (GRP) measure to track regional economic performance.

Other areas noted as data challenges for the RDAs were:

- population patterns projections and migration (11%)
- energy use and consumption (8%, both renewable and non-renewable), and
- the environment (15%, including natural resource growth and opportunities, water use and management, and information on natural disasters).

A snapshot of RDA research

Each RDA has the option of undertaking research, either individually or in cooperation with other regions. This part of the survey captured the research completed, underway or being contemplated by each RDA.

RDAs are undertaking a variety of practical research initiatives into priority issues for their region.

The Australian Government has provided dedicated resources for specific issues including preparing regions for the implementation of the National Broadband Network and Murray-Darling Basin Plan. State governments have also provided resources for specific issues.

The influence of Australian Government funding decisions in directing funding to national policy priorities can be seen in the prevalence of projects related to the National Broadband Network (18 projects) and Murray-Darling Basin (8 projects).

Transport/Infrastructure (12 projects) and workforce issues (14 projects) are also common areas of investment for RDAs.

Other re-occurring themes included energy (7 projects), low carbon economy (4 projects), environmental issues (6 projects) and research into the resource sector (8 projects)

A number of Committees have also chosen to invest in further developing regional plans (7 projects) or regional information sources (8 projects).

Only two of the RDAs who responded did not currently have projects underway.

The Tables in the Appendix detail the research currently completed or underway in each area and the RDA undertaking the work.

Barriers to implementing the projects and initiatives in RDA regional plans

The RDAs recognized a number of logistical problems to achieving their vision.

A lack of resources (45%) and a lack of funding (61%) were the most common responses.

Challenges influencing the various levels of government were important as well as a lack of collaboration between stakeholders and prioritization of projects.

Many of these problems were seen a cyclical and reinforcing. A lack of funding creates an inability to conduct research. The absence of research to support RDA work then decreases the ability to influence decision makers, increase interest in regional issues and generate investment.

RDAs coming contribution of independent research on key issues that is relevant and useful for a variety of RDAs can assist in breaking this cycle for regional organisations.

RDA Advice on Priority Research Areas

Answers to this question reflected the RDA top priorities identified earlier in the survey.

The two most common recommended research areas identified in this survey were economic development (25%) and employment (17%). These revolved around how to create prosperous economies and how to manage problems of unemployment. Other areas included infrastructure development, population management, problems of education and environmental management (most commonly water usage).

There was also interest in RAI developing models or indicators by which to measure or encourage regional development (15%).

Others called for an increase in information on regional areas or the development of current research into usable data with practical implications.

Some specific proposals included:

- Review of economic investment policies in Australia with the intent of increasing focus on regional areas
- The impact of the growth of the resource sector
- Information on what attracts and retains population in regional areas
- The implications of recent policy, examples provided included the Carbon Tax and the National Broadband Network
- Information on food production and water management
- Natural gas extension
- Data on small towns and how to ensure their survival

Initial project ideas were also mentioned, including creating a more concrete definition of “regional” and providing case studies of successful regional development.

Collaboration between RDAs and RAI in the future

This question sought input on the most effective ways for RAI to engage RDAs in the future.

Three options were suggested with an opportunity for RDAs to identify other methods for collaboration and engagement.

Collaboration Methodology	RDAs Level of Support
Regular correspondence through RAI publications and subscriptions	57%
Consultation on issue based projects deemed relevant by either party	89%
Events/participation in RDA forums	87%

Other suggestions included:

- engagement via RDA chair meetings, regional and national RDA forums or other RDA hosted events
- collaboration on research projects either as partners, research leaders or co-funding, and
- regular feedback from the RAI to RDAs with opportunities for RDA input.

A genuine role in research projects where RAI and RDA priorities meet is sought by the Committees. Opportunities for face-to-face engagement are preferred to engagement through publications and subscriptions, although both are supported by a majority of RDAs.

Next Steps

The feedback from the RDA Committees has contributed to the initial focus of RAI in terms of its research themes and initial investments.

On 19 April 2012, RAI announced that it would be developing seven research areas within its Research Agenda:

1. An examination of population mobility trends in Australia's regions.
2. Options for resolving land use conflict in regional development, particularly focusing on current conflicts between the resources sector and agriculture.
3. New strategies for regional communities to manage fly-in, fly-out or drive-in, drive-out workforces.
4. How we best manage the long-term challenges of renewal after natural disasters.
5. Options to solve the local infrastructure crisis.
6. A long-term project to develop better sources of usable, accessible and authoritative data on regional development.
7. A stocktake of the regional development research in Australia.

These align to a number of areas of priority for RDAs revealed in the survey.

Two areas of research (Areas 6 & 7) will assist in overcoming some of the data and information constraints and duplication risks mentioned in the survey.

As part of the development of the other 5 research areas, RDAs identifying issues as a priority or who have noted they are already doing or considering doing work in the area will be contacted by RAI to seek further input. This process will respond to the request by RDAs to be involved in the development of priority projects as part of a collaboration with RAI.

RAI has also announced its intention to develop regional forums that will provide opportunities for further engagement with RDAs and will seek to participate in the upcoming RDA national forum.

RDAs can also stay in touch with RAI via a quarterly newsletter subscription on the website www.regionalaustralia.org.au.

Appendix

Survey Participants

List of RDAs that participated in the survey

State	Survey Participants
NSW	Central Coast Far South Coast Far West Hunter Illawarra Mid North Coast Murray Northern Inland Northern Rivers Orana Riverina
VIC	Gippsland Grampians Hume, Victoria Loddon Mallee
WA	Goldfields-Esperance Great Southern Midwest Gascoyne Peel Wheatbelt Inc.
QLD	Barwon South West Darling Downs & South West Far North Qld & Torres Strait Ipswich and West Moreton. Logan and Redlands Mackay, Issac and Whitsunday Moreton Bay Sunshine Coast Townsville and North West Queensland Wide Bay Burnett
SA	Barossa Limestone Coast Inc. Whyalla and Eyre Peninsula Yorke and Mid North
TAS	RDA Tasmania
NT	RDA Northern Territory

RDA Research Projects

Murray Darling Basin Plan

State	RDA	Short Project Description
NSW	Northern Inland	Opportunities for business diversification if the Murray Darling Basin Plan is implemented
NSW	Riverina	Impacts of the Murray Darling Basin Plan
NSW	Far West	Develop response to challenges in a water constrained environment (Complete)
QLD	Darling Downs	Implications of Murray Darling Basin Plan
VIC	Hume	Study into impact of Murray Darling Basin Plan (Complete) Project related to Murray Darling Basin Plan
VIC	Loddon and Mallee	Social and economic impacts of Murray Darling Basin Plan (Complete) Mitigation projects for Murray Darling Basin Plan

NBN/Digital Economy

State	RDA	Short Project Description
NSW	Central Coast	Potential study into impacts of NBN
NSW	Illawarra	Development of digital economy strategy
NSW	Mid North Coast	Digital Strategy commissioned research (completed) Digital Strategy implementation Promoting and preparing for NBN
NSW	Far South Coast	Digital Economy Strategy
NSW	Far West	Digital Economy Strategy (Complete)
NSW	Northern Rivers	Broadband needs and demands (Complete)
QLD	Darling Downs	Research to supporting NBN rollout
QLD	Sunshine Coast	Digital Futures Program
QLD	Moreton Bay	Digital workforces strategy
QLD	Ipswich & West Moreton	Telecommunications study (Complete)
SA	Barossa	Digital Barossa (Complete)
VIC	Grampians	NBN preparedness
VIC	Hume	Digital Economy Strategy
VIC	Gippsland	Equipping region for NBN
WA	Great Southern	Organizing NBN Information Seminar
WA	Wheatbelt	Digital Action Plan

Transport/Infrastructure

State	RDA	Short Project Description
NSW	Northern Inland	Freight study
NSW	Orana	Infrastructure needs Regional Infrastructure Summit (Complete)
QLD	Townsville & North West	Commissioned research into freight and supply chains
QLD	Moreton Bay	Business projects including infrastructure
SA	Limestone Coast	Green triangle Freight Action Plan
SA	Barossa	Freight Transport and Natural Gas extension feasibility
SA	Whyalla & Eyre Peninsula	Port Spencer and Thevenard Port Development and Commercial Fishing Harbor
VIC	Grampians	Transport strategies
VIC	Hume	Report for transport projects
VIC	Gippsland	Pre-feasibility study on local ports (Complete)

Workforce/Skills/Employment

State	RDA	Short Project Description
NSW	Northern Rivers	Future energy workforce needs
NSW	Far South Coast	Skills Audit
NSW	Orana	Indigenous employment Skills and employment forum
NSW	Northern Rivers	Sugar industry workforce needs (Complete)
QLD	Wide Bay Burnett	Research into willingness and capabilities of job seekers,
QLD	Sunshine Coast	Workforce Planning
QLD	Moreton Bay	Business projects including employment
QLD	Ipswich & West Moreton	Learning Region Study (Complete)
SA	Limestone Coast	Workforce development project
SA	York and Mid North	Study of demographic changes in Clare Valley, education and training, especially as a result of the mining extension
VIC	Grampians	Study into workforce needs (examines manufacturing, agriculture, health and tourism) (Complete)
WA	Wheatbelt	Scoping for Skills and Workforce Development Plan (Complete)
WA	Goldfields-Esperance	Implications for FIFO/DIDO workers (Complete)

Energy

State	RDA	Short Project Description
NSW	Mid North Coast	Natural gas and renewable opportunities
NSW	Far South Coast	Renewable energy project
NSW	Northern Rivers	Renewable energy Future energy workforce needs
SA	Barossa	Renewable energy production viability, Natural Gas Extension Strategy
VIC	Grampians	Sustainable energy
WA	Goldfields-Esperance	Researching energy issues

Low Carbon Economy

State	RDA	Short Project Description
NSW	Northern Rivers	Climate change and infrastructure
NSW	Mid North Coast	Transition to low carbon economy
NSW	Central Coast	Project into understanding impacts of carbon tax
VIC	Gippsland	Plan to lower carbon economy

General Environment and Water Projects

State	RDA	Short Project Description
NSW	Orana	Environmental sustainability projects
NSW	Far West	Menindee Lakes Wetlands Project
NSW	Murray	Scenario planning to respond to water challenges (Complete)
QLD	Darling Downs & South West	Investigation of "water projects" (Complete)
SA	York and Mid North	Climate change vulnerability strategy (Complete)
WA	Peel	Catchment's condition and priorities (Complete)

Mining/Resources Industry

State	RDA	Short Project Description
NSW	Orana	Research into the mining industry
QLD	Wide Bay Burnett	Study into resources sector, the workforce and economic impact Forums on resource sector opportunities
QLD	Mackay, Issac & Whitsunday	Cross regional response to resources sector growth Resource catchment workforce development strategy (Complete)
QLD	Ipswich & West Moreton	Mining paper (Complete)
QLD	Darling Downs & South West	Study of Mining Boom (Complete)
SA	York and Mid North	Study of demographic changes in Clare Valley, education and training, especially as a result of the mining extension

Planning

State	RDA	Short Project Description
NSW	Far West	Implementing the Regional Plan
NSW	Hunter	Developing a Hunter Strategy
NSW	Mid North Coast	Strategic Regional Leadership Conference, bring together academics, policy makers and other key players to discuss regional issues
NT	RDA NT	Regional Plan Review
SA	Whyalla & Eyre Peninsula	Lucky Bay Integrated Master Plan
WA	Great Southern	Reviewing regional plan
WA	Wheatbelt	Scoping for sub-regional economic development strategy (Complete)

Regional Data and Information

State	RDA	Short Project Description
NSW	Northern Rivers	Social indicators
NSW	Far South Coast	Update regional statistics (Complete)
NSW	Hunter	Development of Gross Regional Product (Complete)
NSW	Northern Rivers	Environmental status and capability (Complete)
QLD	Moreton Bay	Business confidence survey
SA	York and Mid North	Development of regional profiles (Complete)
VIC	Gippsland	New settlers to Gippsland (Complete)
WA	Peel	Mapping of community, social, health and education sectors

Other Projects

State	RDA	Short Project Description
NSW	Riverina	Support research into e-health
NSW	Mid North Coast	Affordable housing project
NSW	Murray	Murray Valley Industry Park-Learning Centre
NSW	Central Coast	Research into needs/expectations of small businesses
NSW	Northern Inland	Town audit benchmark study
NSW	Far West	Economic updates
NSW	Northern Rivers	Food industry profile (Complete)
NSW	Illawarra	Economic and Employment impact from Green Jobs
NT	RDA NT	Waste Management Centre Multi-purpose Building Industry Training Centre
QLD	Darling Downs	Benefits of introducing MidiCities Strategy Potential benefits of Communities 4 Communities program
QLD	Mackay, Issac & Whitsunday	Rural future project Social inclusion and wellbeing audit
QLD	Moreton Bay	Feasibility of business innovation centre
QLD	Far North and Torres Strait	Development of 12 priority packages (not specified)
QLD	Logan and Redlands	Midicities Social Action Plan
SA	Barossa	Horticulture and water strategies Township place management Health strategies
SA	Barossa	Water strategy Farm On!
SA	Barossa	Tourism Gap Audit (Complete)
SA	York and Mid North	Value of Cycle Tourism (Complete)
VIC	Grampians	Heritage development
VIC	Hume	Tertiary Education Aspirations Study
VIC	Gippsland	Food Plan
VIC	Gippsland	Timber industry (Complete)
VIC	Hume	Tourism analysis
WA	Wheatbelt	Developing model to accommodate ageing population Identifying and addressing youth related issues
WA	Wheatbelt	Childcare need assessment (Complete)

Survey Questions

1. What is your name?
2. Which Regional Development Australia Committee are you from?
3. Which goal of your strategy is currently the highest priority and why?
4. Why is this goal your highest priority?
5. In conjunction with community and business consultations and chambers of commerce, what are currently your three most important sources of information on regional issues?
 - State or Federal Government reports
 - Academics
 - Self-conducted research
 - Newspapers and print media
 - Internet or web based sources
 - Other (please specify)
6. What research projects have you recently completed?
7. What projects do you currently have underway or are developing?
8. In understanding your region's status and issues, what kind of essential data or information is not currently available?
9. What are the main barriers to implementing the projects and initiatives in your regional plan?
10. What areas of research do you think should be a national priority for RAI?
11. What are the best ways for the RAI to engage and collaborate with nonmetropolitan RDA's?
 - Regular correspondence through RAI publications and subscriptions
 - Consultation on issue based projects deemed relevant by either party
 - Events/Participation in RDA Forum
 - Other (please specify)
12. Further comments or suggestion