



Regional Development Australia-
NORTHERN RIVERS
ANNUAL OUTCOMES REPORT

2020 – 2021



An Australian Government Initiative

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Regional Development Australia - Northern Rivers Board would like to acknowledge the Board members and Staff for their assistance in preparing this Annual Report on Outcomes.

I, Donald Page, Chair of RDA-Northern Rivers, certify this is the Annual Report on Outcomes authorised for RDA-Northern Rivers for the period 2020 – 2021.



The Hon Donald Page
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We respectfully acknowledge the Aboriginal peoples of the Northern Rivers – including the peoples of the Bundjalung, Yaegl and Gumbaynggirr nations – as the traditional custodians and guardians of these lands and waters now known as the Northern Rivers and we pay our respects to their Elders past and present.

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INTRODUCTION

The 2020-2021 Annual Report on Outcomes is based on the Business Plan (Resilience Action Plan) established under the economic and environmental constraints following seasons of natural disasters and of course the COVID pandemic which still remains problematic well into 2021.

In response to lockdown orders in 2020, the Australian Government released a range of measures including JobKeeper, JobSeeker, JobSaver and JobTrainer which ameliorated the worst of the predicted economic impacts. All this helped the Northern Rivers economy survive through the prolonged pandemic. However, from July to September 2021, the NSW state-wide lockdown created economic and social difficulties for businesses across the Northern Rivers region, and in particular businesses and communities along the border that are integrated with South-East Queensland.

The necessity and ability for large numbers of the population to work remotely has led to increased migration from metro areas into regional Australia. As a perceived lifestyle region, Northern Rivers, NSW became a popular destination for relocation. This has placed great pressure on housing, social services and infrastructure, and investment into these areas will be critical in the next few years.

This report may turn out to be the first of many which respond to disruptive economic and social forces, some of which are yet to be fully understood, within a new 'COVID Economy'.

KEY OUTCOMES 2020-21

Throughout the difficult and uncertain economic period of this report, RDA NR was pleased to see a flow of enquiries from investors outside the region as well as existing businesses seeking advice and assistance for reinvestment. We believe that this represents mid to long term confidence in the local economy. A precis of these and other activities is below:

Core activities and functions

- Launched the “North Coast Employment Strategy” in collaboration with RDA Mid North Coast. The strategy covers the whole of the NSW North Coast and seeks to improve opportunities for businesses to attract and retain workers.
- Expansion of the My Future Workforce Platform which has a database of over 200 local jobseekers and more than 70 businesses and service providers. Made improvements for school to industry engagements.
- Held the Australian Future Agro Challenge, the Australian arm of an international agri-tech event.
- Maintaining a focus on COVID displaced, youth, indigenous employment opportunities including sitting on the Local Jobs Program Taskforce:
 - This focus has led to a number of collaborations and projects, initiatives, activities working groups etc.
- Contributed to regional Committees which inform program and policy making, eg NC Regional Leaders Executive Economic sub-committee.
- Provision of fee-for-service contracts with Destination North Coast and Northern Rivers Joint Organisation.
- Provided community organisations and councils with REMPLAN economic analysis for grant applications.
- Refined and developed the operation and governance of the regional brand, launched as Northern Rivers NSW.

Support and advice to Government stakeholders and businesses

- Produced relevant and timely reports including a scenario-based study on likely impacts of COVID-19 on the Northern Rivers’ economy.
- 340 substantial interactions were recorded with regards to key recordable activities. Of these, around 190 online, teleconference or face to face meetings were held with various agencies, businesses and stakeholders regarding jobs and local procurement for business resilience and preparedness. Topics with a regional outcomes focus range from collaborative projects, regional economic and industry development, and strategic issues.
- Approximately 50 meetings and teleconferences were held with local industry and business. Key topics were grants, investment and trade and export related matters.
- 26 interactions included submissions and engagements with Ministers at both state and federal levels of government to advocate on resilience and other important issues.
- Seven Northern Rivers Joint Organisation Committee and General Managers meetings were attended throughout the year. Many more interactions were held with LG Economic Development Managers.

- The remainder was made up of a mix of media engagements, board meetings, events, other regional meetings.

Key publications

- Launched North Coast Employment Strategy in collaboration with RDA MNC.
- Launched 'Economic Scenarios' outlook with local economist which projected the impacts to the region from COVID 19 under different constraints/impacts.
- "Waste to Wages" business case which established the economic returns for a waste recycling centre focusing on the marine industry at Clarence Valley.

Industry Development

- Northern Rivers has a tradition of supporting sustainable industries and an interesting emerging industry is a green hydrogen cluster (see case study).
- Despite the economic slowdown across many sectors RDA NR fielded enquiries from emerging industry sectors including: algae for human consumption, hemp production and processing, medicinal cannabis and waste to energy.
- Facilitated the establishment of a Virtual Reality cluster in Byron.

Submissions, Committees and consultations

- Submissions were made to enquiries into Visitor Economy and visa related submission to Department of Home Affairs.
- Participated in many regional committees including Regional Leadership Executive Economic Sub-Committee, Cross Border Economic Committee, Regional Jobs Program Taskforce, Northern Rivers NSW Brand Committee, Cross Border Tourism Working Group and more.
- Attended General Manager Advisory Committee meetings.
- Attended Northern Rivers Joint Organisation as an Associate Member.
- Supported councils with applications to Infrastructure Australia's Priority Project List
- Participated in Northern Rivers Cooperatives Alliance, a group of major regional employers.

Employment Pathways Projects:

RDA NR provides valuable industry linkages to the schools and agencies and seeks to improve pathways for all unemployed youth.

- "Waste to Wages" Marine recycling project aimed at youth, indigenous and long term unemployed.
- Participated in NSW Education STEM Industry School Program (SISP)
- Presented for NSW Education's EPPP TV Channel encouraging youth into construction, food processing and creative industries.
- Innovative regional youth training and employment events.



Our people

Under direction of the Hon Don Page, OA Chair of RDA Northern Rivers Board and the Board Members, the RDA Northern Rivers staff comprise:

- Tim Williamson, Director of Regional Development
- Donna McIntyre, Administration Manager
- Kyllie Walker, Finance Officer, Visa processing officer and maintains a research role
- Heidi Bone, Communications Officer and RDA NR IT systems, security etc.

Governance

- A funding agreement with the Commonwealth Government for the period 2021-2025 is current.
- RDA Northern Rivers also performed responsibilities as a Regional Certifying Body for Visa sub-types 491 and 494.

CASE STUDY:

NORTHERN RIVERS, NSW: A CASE STUDY OF A REGIONAL LOCATION AS A CENTRE FOR EMERGING INDUSTRIES

Background

The Northern Rivers, NSW is often awarded the accolade as one of Australia's leading creative regions. The Byron Shire, Lismore, Tweed and Ballina are hubs for creative industries and are of themselves magnets for fine art, film and television and more recently, digital technologists and artists.

VR + AR = XR

Virtual Reality (VR) technologies are combined with Augmented Reality (AR) to create Extended Reality (XR). Exponents in these fields have been drawn from across the globe to establish primarily in the Byron Bay area. While the industry is only small, number in the twenties its reach is international and extends from electronic gaming, platform development and film and television.

Establishing a regional XR Cluster

Led by a local champion, Jaimee Skippon-Volke and partner Ossie Alfaro, founders of GreenhouseFX, the couple approached RDA Northern Rivers to help develop the nascent industry. A high-level environmental scan was undertaken and it identified just over twenty businesses, service providers and individuals working in and around Byron Bay, but with global networks. Indeed some had moved specifically from overseas to Byron to be near like-minded developers.

Many within the network had met up informally. There was an overt keenness to develop as more than just an industry network and an opportunity arose for RDA NR to collaborate with NBNco to engage specialist in cluster development, Queensland-based Advivo.

Advivo spent a half day bringing the group together and taking the attendees through the fundamentals of forming a cluster. The group decided that given their business interdependencies, the range of complementary products and services, the skill sets and the opportunities, operating as a cluster would provide them with the framework to grow individually and as a group.

Early Wins

Within a matter of days, the business opportunities became apparent as they banded together to bid on projects that as individuals they were too small, but had the capacity as joint venture partners. The cluster has now established under the auspice of another organisation which provides a level of governance on the pathway to determining their future as their own formal legal structure.

CASE STUDY:

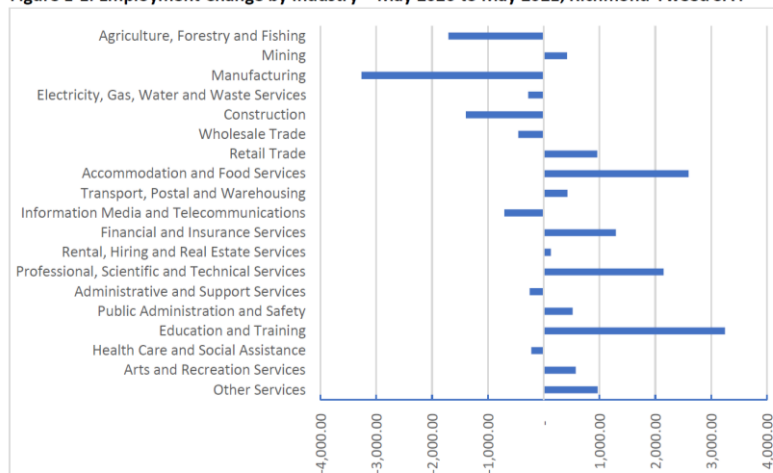
RDA NORTHERN RIVERS – Impact of COVID-19 on the economy

RDA NR commissioned PPM Consulting to evaluate COVID-19 impact on the regional economy. As anticipated the overall employment figures waxed and waned in time with lockdowns and in particular the closures of the Queensland border. Employment by industry by May 2021 showed an improvement on May 2020, just after the pandemic enforced widespread lockdowns across the nation. However, there were 119,078 employed persons in February 2020, which fell to 116,741 in May 2020, a loss of 2,337.

Presumably owing to the impact of the Commonwealth government’s JobKeeper program, employment remained around the 116,000 level for the rest of 2020. Following Christmas and New Year, a recovery in employment numbers began with an increase of around 2,000 employed persons in February 2021. By May 2021, employment in the Northern Rivers had increased above its pre-pandemic level, rising by a further 2,800 between May 2020 and February 2021.

Figure E-1 shows that Manufacturing was the industry hardest-hit by the COVID-induced downturn, dropping 3,200 jobs in the year to May 2021. Education & Training, and Accommodation & Food Services rose the most, by 3,200 and 2,500 respectively.

Figure E-1: Employment Change by Industry – May 2020 to May 2021, Richmond-Tweed SA4



Source: ABS Labour Force, Australia, Detailed, July 2021, PPM Economics and Strategy
 * It is assumed that the figure for Financial and Insurance Services for May 2021 was an error and has been adjusted accordingly.

Using economic modelling, the projected change in output of \$3.1 billion results in a drop in output results in a modelled \$382.3 million drop in 2020-2021 GRP compared with 2019-20. According to the model, employment rose by 762 and wages rose by \$53.3 million. Based on the drop in employment, it is estimated that GRP has fallen by 2.4 per cent in 2020-21, compared with 2019-20. Likewise, output has fallen by 9.5 per cent, while wages and salaries have grown by 0.6 per cent.

Recent lockdowns in Sydney, combined with Queensland border closures have now created a worsening financial and economic scenario across the region, but the timing falls outside of this Annual Report on Outcomes and will be covered in the next Annual report.

OUTCOMES 2020-2021

Summary of Key Priorities

Summary of top 5 strategic priorities for the year:

1. Increase employment opportunities, focusing on youth
2. Attract strategic investment and re-investment, support regional branding and promotion
3. Strategically facilitate emerging Industry opportunities, and encourage a sustainable start up eco-system
4. Develop strategic Freight and Supply Chain initiatives
5. Support councils funding applications for improved enabling infrastructure

Summary of top 5 key business activities for upcoming year:

1. Increase employment opportunities, focusing on youth, COVID displaced and indigenous
2. Support indigenous-focused employment activities including; targeted employment initiatives and pathways projects.
3. Support and drive business resilience and business preparedness activities.
4. Support and drive local procurement projects
5. Drive high levels of collaboration across the Economic Development Community

Summary of Communications during COVID-19:

In 2020-21 RDA NR continued to promote initiatives to support local business and industry to recover from the impact of the pandemic.

Information about opportunities and initiatives was shared through our regular eNews and dedicated emails to over 2,000 subscribers on our eNews list. This included encouraging businesses to participate in surveys to assess local impact, providing information and sharing opportunities.

We shared 19 stories and informational items and two dedicated email campaigns directly related to COVID-19 recovery initiatives.

RDA NR continued to provide a point of reference for local business, industry and the wider community to connect to information about government COVID-19 support initiatives on the RDA Northern Rivers website. This page is continually reviewed to ensure links provide access to the most up to date information.

The level of social media activity relating to the pandemic was reduced significantly thanks to the absence of local transmission and our local economy enjoying a continued period of open trading. There were six posts directly related to COVID-19 business recovery as well as regular promotion of workshops and webinars to support business to pivot and grow in a post-COVID economy.

Outcomes measured against key themes

REPORT ON RECOVERY ACTION PLAN 2020-21

OUTCOME THEME 1	REGIONAL RECOVERY PLANNING FOR IMPROVED ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OUTCOMES.		
OUTPUT i.	Improve and coordinate economic recovery planning efforts through data gathering, research and analysis		
What will we do?	What did we do?	Did it have an impact?	Performance Measures
<p>1.1. Collate, assess and review other agencies and LGA “Regional Recovery Plans”</p> <p>LEAD</p>	<p>Assessed recovery and resilience plans to develop a baseline of regional actions.</p>	<p>Increased data and information base. Resulted in better understanding and coordination of activities.</p>	<p>Regional plans assessed and synthesised for improved coordination.</p>
<p>1.2. Identify and prioritise assistance for key business and industry located in the most affected LG areas</p> <p>LEAD</p>	<p>Collaborated across all LGAs, Tweed, Byron, Ballina, Lismore, Kyogle, Richmond and Clarence Valley to identify critical areas of assistance.</p>	<p>Assistance was provided through hosting webinars, events, supporting and applying for grants and coordinating cross-government and cross border meetings.</p>	<p>Online meetings, events and assistance were provided to all LGA teams.</p>
<p>1.3. Create a knowledge base of data and information</p> <p>LEAD</p>	<p>Collated data and information gathered from LGA and other platforms and sources such as REMPLAN, scenario planning was undertaken</p>	<p>The information and scenario modelling were shared with other organisations, MPs etc. This data was impactful in that we developed regional-specific analysis.</p>	<p>Knowledge base and research pieces were produced for the region specifically.</p>

OUTCOME THEME 2	A MORE RESILIENT ECONOMY		
OUTPUT ii.	Improve Business Capability		
What will we do?	What did we do?	Did it have an impact?	Performance Measures
<p>2.1. Ensure businesses can continue trading or recommence as soon as possible</p> <p>LEAD & SUPPORT</p>	<p>Participated in a number of regional leaders' committees.</p> <p>Supported LG economic development teams and management with their own local programs.</p>	<p>The Committees established the leadership and strategies for the region across agencies and levels of government.</p>	<p>Membership of a broad range of cross government committees and meetings.</p> <p>Individual LG activities supported including Lismore, Byron, Tweed and Richmond Valley</p>
<p>2.2. Advocate for red tape and green tape reduction and overcome barriers to trading</p> <p>LEAD</p>	<p>Consistently advocated for appropriate levels of red and green tape reduction through our committee work and other channels.</p>	<p>While much of this work is ongoing, there is now wider acceptance that regional businesses can be more disadvantaged than metro counterparts in certain circumstances</p>	<p>Increased awareness and acceptance of red and green tape barriers to trading</p>
<p>2.3. Assist businesses to pivot and increase online presence where needed</p> <p>LEAD & SUPPORT</p>	<p>Spoke on webinars and supported other events which encouraged businesses to increase online engagement and pivot to different business models. RDANR also used our own channels to promote best practice examples of local businesses pivoting their business models.</p>	<p>A variety of local businesses have adapted and survived the current crisis through increasing their online presence and / or pivoting business models.</p>	<p>Decreased business failure, increased online revenue generation, increased local supply chain development and increased business diversification.</p>

OUTCOME THEME 3	LOCAL SUPPLY CHAIN DEVELOPMENT and MAJOR PROJECTS		
OUTPUT iii.	Improve access by local supply chains and value chains into major project		
What will we do?	What did we do?	Did it have an impact?	Performance Measures
3.1: Assist LG GMs and ED units to develop local procurement pathways SUPPORT	Lead and supported local supply chain development and local procurement opportunities.	Typically, Councils only promote within their borders and RDA NR was able to support wider regional procurement opportunities.	Increased resilience, shorter and more secure supply chain, less leakage of dollars out of the local economy.
3.2: Bring forward infrastructure projects LEAD AND SUPPORT	Supported councils with funding applications to infrastructure grant opportunities	The region has attracted millions of dollars of infrastructure including roads, bridges, improved telecommunications etc.	Councils achieving infrastructure plans and goals.

OUTCOME THEME 4	WORKFORCE OF THE FUTURE		
OUTPUT iv	Improve employment outcomes for businesses and jobseekers		
What will we do?	What did we do?	Did it have an impact?	Performance Measures
4.1: Support workforce development and employment opportunities LEAD AND SUPPORT	Accepted a position on the Regional Jobs Program Taskforce. Member of a number of regional committees. Launched Employment Strategy Focused on construction, creative, visitor economy and digital industries	Increasing and improving workforce development opportunities in targeted sectors by actively engaging in a wide range of projects, programs and activities with stakeholders	More productive engagement between businesses and a range of supporting organisations to improve workforce development outcomes

OUTCOME THEME 4	WORKFORCE OF THE FUTURE		
OUTPUT iv	Improve employment outcomes for businesses and jobseekers		
What will we do?	What did we do?	Did it have an impact?	Performance Measures
4.2: Create career pathways for young people LEAD AND SUPPORT	<p>Increased resources and improved the My Future Workforce Platform (NR) to provide a regional platform for school based apprenticeship and traineeship opportunities as well as creating pathways for youth to local industry.</p> <p>Guest presenter on an industry panel (construction) which was distributed through Training Services NSW.</p> <p>Collaborated on a number of industry pathway events and meetings which align with RDANR priorities.</p>	<p>Students and youth are better matched to relevant jobs and industries.</p> <p>Over 70 businesses and two hundred job seekers are registered onto the platform.</p>	<p>Improved linkages between schools' careers advisors, students and industry</p>

OUTCOME THEME 5	REGIONAL INVESTMENT		
OUTPUT v	Increase regional investment flows		
What will we do?	What did we do?	Did it have an impact?	Performance Measures
5.1 Encourage local investment into stalled projects LEAD	<p>Leading a collaborative interagency/organisation for regional investment. Worked with project proponents to ensure commitment to investment within the region.</p>	<p>Investment activities are now more coordinated leading to an easier and more efficient process for investors.</p>	<p>Increase in investment contacts and leads.</p>

OUTCOME THEME 6	REGIONAL PROMOTION AND INVESTMENT ATTRACTION		
OUTPUT vi	Increased recognition of Northern Rivers as an investible region		
What will we do?	What did we do?	Did it have an impact?	Performance Measures
6.1 Increase promotion of the region including leveraging the Brand NR NSW SUPPORT:	The Brand has become a sub-committee of RDA NR. Projects have been prioritised to increase the region’s profile including investment, liveability, visitation, products and services.	The program has increased members to over 250 and increased its social media following across the Northern Rivers and further afield.	Increase in SM followers, shares etc. Increase in visitation (in non-lockdown periods)