



11 June 2004

The Director
General Purpose Standing Committee No5
Legislative Council
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
Sydney NSW 2000

Email: gpseno5@parliament.nsw.gov.au

Dear Sir

Submission to Inquiry into the Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture

Introduction

The Riverina Regional Development Board is one of 13 Ministerially appointed Boards operating in New South Wales promoting regional economic development initiatives (hence sustainable jobs) in regional NSW. The Board addresses this objective in a number of ways including the provision of advice to the NSW Government and the Minister for Regional Development on important regional development issues.

The Board's Regional Economic Development Strategy lists **"Employment Education and Training"** as a key component. The mission for this strategy states:

To work cooperatively with industry and government to support initiatives aimed at enhancing employment and maximising the availability of human resources to allow for growth throughout the region.

The announcement on 3 September 2003 by the Hon Ian Macdonald MLC, Minister for Agriculture and Fisheries, of the closure of the Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture for the delivery of full and part-time residential courses was, therefore, an assault on the integrity of the Board's strategic mission for the Riverina.

The Riverina is widely known as the 'clean, green and fertile' engine room of production for NSW and Australia. It is not the focus of hobby farm activity or "Pitt Street Farmers". It is an intensely cropped, irrigated and cultivated sector of NSW that supplies Australia and many export locations in the world with quality produce.

It is the focus of irrigation innovation and practice and many other researched and implemented farming initiatives.

The Board's area of jurisdiction comprises 76,346 square kilometres and boasts a population of 162,848 across 16 Local Government areas. It contains two significant Regional Cities in Wagga Wagga and Griffith and other vibrant towns including Tumut (Forestry) in the East and Leeton (MIA) in the West.

The Board's Strategic Plan 2004-2010 discloses the following statistics:

- The Riverina boasts over \$1 billion annually in agricultural and horticultural production
- The Riverina is NSW largest producer of wine-65% of NSW wine grapes are produced in the Riverina
- Value of production-over \$300 million p.a.
- Riverina is one of Australia's largest rice producers-value of rice production \$135 million p.a.
- Large Citrus grower. Value of production \$120 million p.a.
- Large variety of summer and winter cereal crops-volume production near 900,000 tonnes p.a.

Clearly the provision of education and training to new generation farmers in the region is a fundamental requirement in a rural environment where 'big picture' production is the norm.

Further, the water debate has magnified the need for new generation farmers to be educated in the management of water issues, especially irrigation. The advent of Catchment Management Authorities further exacerbates the need for farmers to be able to access education in all facets of natural resource management and the facility at Murrumbidgee College has the capability to deliver such a service.

The Riverina Regional Development Board resolved at its recent meeting to make a submission to the subject inquiry, following earlier representations to Country Labor Caucus and to the proposal, "Lifelong learning-The Future of Public Education in NSW".

The Submission to Mr Gerard Martin, Chair, Country Labor Caucus, made on 14th October 2003, focused on the Board's serious concerns that the actions announced by Minister Macdonald MLC, would result in a severe reduction in delivery of tailored education services in agriculture to the Riverina with attendant job losses. In the Board's view, these actions, without apparent justification, constitute an impediment to the economic future for the Riverina.

The Board's response to the 'Lifelong Learning' proposal addressed, in part, the desirability of the Agricultural College at Murrumbidgee being included in the enquiry as a deliverer of VET courses in the Riverina. The Board was of the opinion that the inclusion of at least MCA in the 'Lifelong Learning' review would have

furthered synergies, generated savings and the attainment of sustainable service standards in the agricultural education field.

The Board makes this submission in accordance with the terms of reference as follows:

a) The process by which the decision was made to close the residential training

The Board has relied upon information made available through Leeton Shire Council, one of the 16 Council's in the Board's jurisdiction and from the Board's own research of information gleaned from various meetings held at Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture and from other reliable sources.

It is understood that, notwithstanding a Government commitment to rural New South Wales to undertake a Rural Communities Impact statement where significant industry and job disruption would occur, no such study was made prior to the announcement to cease the delivery of full-time and part time residential courses at MCA.

There appears to be little support in the Region for the accuracy or integrity of enrolment/cost figures released in the Minister's statement.

In the circumstances, the Board does not have any confidence in any process that may have been applied before the Minister's announcement.

b) the community and industry consultation that preceded the announcement of the proposal

The Riverina Regional Development Board, the key NSW Regional Economic Development Body in the Region, is charged with the responsibility of informing the NSW Government and the Minister for Regional Development on important regional development issues. However, it was not aware, or made aware, of any process for community or industry consultation prior to the announcement on 3 September 2003.

c) the impact on the Leeton and Yanco communities and district

Leeton Shire Council has provided information to the Board that reveals that altogether, 31 positions in the Education and Training program plus a further 13 corporate services positions, will see 44 jobs lost to that community. This equates to a direct loss of over \$2 million annually in wages. The Shire considers that the application of a multiplier of 3 will result in an annual economic loss of \$6 million from the Leeton and Yanco community.

This position is clearly unacceptable to the Board and challenges in many respects the Regional Economic Development Strategy that is the cornerstone of the Board's operation in the region.

d) the reasons why Murrumbidgee and Tocal Colleges have not been transferred to the Department of education and Training

The Board is aware of a paper that promotes a case for a new collegiate system for rural and remote students through rural education and training precincts. The proposal canvasses the transfer of MCA and Tocal colleges to the NSW Department of Education and Training and the development of a new Murrumbidgee Education and Training Precinct.

The transfer would include all resources (including any staff, facilities and NSW and Commonwealth Treasury allocations). This would include MCA, Riverina Institute (RIT) (campuses at Leeton, Narrandera and Griffith), Leeton High School, Narrandera High School, Yanco Agricultural High School, Griffith High School and Wade High School. Central schools in the Griffith District would also be included. Charles Sturt University (CSU) would participate in the Precinct as it is linked to MCA through an Affiliate Institute Agreement. It is understood that RIT has similar arrangements with CSU. This would also add value to the Western Riverina Higher Education Project (an RRDB project) that has seen the establishment in 2004 of an Advanced Diploma in Business Management and Bachelor of Business Studies courses run as an Integrated Program (CSU and TAFE), from TAFE facilities at Griffith with 30 enrolments in 2004.

The Board understands that precedents exist for the transfer of agricultural colleges into broader educational facilities. In NSW this has occurred with Wagga Wagga, Hawkesbury and Orange Agricultural Colleges being transferred away from the Department of Agriculture. These educational institutions have subsequently continued to provide an enhanced range of courses for rural communities and industries.

Finally, it is understood that since the facility at MCA was closed for full-time and part time residential courses, only one or two students from this region have chosen to move to Tocal. This is an extremely poor response and does not auger well for the appropriate and convenient training of farmers in this region at a time when, more than ever before, the issue of family farm succession planning is under scrutiny.

The Board, therefore, cannot understand why Murrumbidgee and Tocal Colleges have not been transferred to the Department of Education and Training under a model as proposed above or similar.

Mr Pat Brassil AM, Deputy Chairman of the Board, would like to take the opportunity to address the Committee during its hearing at MCA on Monday 21st June 2004. Mr Brassil will be accompanied by the Board's Executive Officer, Mr Peter Dale.

Yours faithfully

Peter Dale
Executive Officer

