

Submission
No 472

**INQUIRY INTO HEALTH OUTCOMES AND ACCESS TO
HEALTH AND HOSPITAL SERVICES IN RURAL,
REGIONAL AND REMOTE NEW SOUTH WALES**

Organisation: Gwydir Cotton Growers Association

Date Received: 15 January 2021



Submission to NSW Government on:

*Inquiry into health outcomes and access to health
and hospital services in rural,
regional and remote New South Wales
January 2021*

By:

Gwydir Cotton Growers Association

15th January 2021

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1 Summary and Purpose

This document has been developed by the Gwydir Cotton Growers Association (CGA) on behalf of its members as a formal submission for consideration by the New South Wales Government during their Inquiry into health outcomes and access to health and hospital services in rural, regional and remote New South Wales

This document aims to represent the concerns, views and experiences of our members, not as individuals but as a local industry. Each member reserves the right to express their own opinion and is entitled to make their own submission.

1.1 List of Recommendations

- 1. We recommend that there be a concerted effort to encourage more doctors to live and work in regional centres. They need to be encouraged to join regional medical practices. It is important that as part of this, consideration is given to supporting students from regional NSW to study medicine.**
- 2. We recommend that more registrars be appointed to local hospitals to support the General Practitioners in the Emergency Departments, especially after hours.**
- 3. We recommend that doctors are not only encouraged to live and work in regional centres, but that they are supported in gaining additional training so that they can provide more care to regional patients.**
- 4. We recommend the NSW health department determine a mechanism which will facilitate a more efficient means to enable annual check-ups and referrals to be accomplished.**

2 Introduction

The Gwydir Cotton Growers Association (CGA) as the representative body for cotton growers in the Gwydir Valley supports and welcome the opportunity to contribute to the 'Inquiry into health outcomes and access to health and hospital services in rural, regional and remote New South Wales'. We acknowledge the importance of finding ways to deliver value for money and to improve the value of health care to our agricultural producers and their communities.

The Gwydir CGA has an active history of working in collaboration with our members to support training and recruitment of health professionals to our region.

3 About the Gwydir Cotton Growers Association

3.1 Our region

The Gwydir Valley Cotton Growers Association (CGA) represents cotton growers and the businesses that service cotton production in the Moree Plains Shire Council region (MPSC) of Northern NSW.

Our mission is to strive for a strong and vibrant local community and cotton industry that works in partnership together.

We value being accountable to our members and our local community, leadership through respect, collaboration and evidence-based conversations and our industry, its people and our community.

The Moree Plains Shire region is highly dependent on agriculture and irrigated agriculture for economic activity contributing over 72% of the value of gross domestic product (cotton is around 60%), employing 20-30% of the population and accounting for almost 90% of exports from the Shire¹.

The 2011 agricultural census estimates that the total value of agricultural commodities for the Moree Plains Shire region was \$911,951,079 up from \$527,744,851 in the 2005-06 census. This is an estimated 7.83% of NSW's total agricultural production from a 1,040,021Ha principally used for agricultural crops². More recently the ABS³ estimated that in 2017-18 that the agricultural production in North-West NSW (where Moree is located) was valued at \$2.1 billion.

The main broad acre irrigated crop is cotton with irrigated wheat, barley and Lucerne also occurring depending on commodity prices. The total developed broad acre irrigated area is approximately 90,000 ha, although recent analysis indicate that maximum planting area is now 70,000ha, with planted area above 50,000ha very rarely cropped in one year.

Changes in water availability either through climate or government policy has had a direct impact on the productivity of the region as well as on the local economy. Analysis by the Murray Darling Basin Authority highlighted this relationship during the northern review and revealed that for both Moree and Collarenebri social and economic indicators declined through 2001 to 2011 including education, economic resources and disadvantage, resulting in an estimated 200 jobs lost due to the implementation of the Basin Plan in the region⁴

3.2 What we do

Our Role is to ensure we have a respected and viable organisation that is engaged with its members, the broader cotton industry and the local community. To improve the connections of the local cotton industry within our communities and support each other, and to represent and be a voice for the needs of our industry members to key stakeholders

The Gwydir CGA is voluntary, funded by a cotton growers and partners membership fee. Much of the activity of the association revolves around providing cotton growers and partners (agricultural distribution representatives, agricultural consultants and finance organisations) information on cotton production, marketing or other industry issues through Area Wide Management meetings, or information forums. The Association does also undertake programs to maintain and improve the sustainability of members on-farm activities, which can be funded by government or research and development corporations.

¹ Cotton Catchment Communities CRC Communities and People Series 2009

² 2010 2011 Agricultural Census Report – agdata cubes, 71210D0005-201011 Agricultural Commodities, Australia

³ 4610055008DO001_201718 GROSS VALUE OF IRRIGATED AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION–2017-18

⁴ <https://www.mdba.gov.au/publications/mdba-reports/northern-basin-review-report>

The Association is managed by a committee of cotton growers and partners and contracts administration requirements to the GVIA. They work in consultation with the industry body Cotton Australia.

3.3 Scholarships and community support

Over the last 22 years the Gwydir Cotton Growers have funded a number of medical scholarships. The aim is to support and encourage our own current and future health professionals, so that our community can benefit from a strong and vibrant health sector.

3.3.1 *Gwydir Valley Cotton Industry's Healthy Communities Scholarship*

This new scholarship replaced the Cotton Industry Undergraduate Medical Scholarship and Allied Health scholarship in 2016. This is for local residents who are studying medicine or health related courses.

3.3.2 *Cotton Industry Undergraduate Medical Scholarship*

The scholarship allocated \$5,000 per year to help fund the final three years of a medical degree. The scholarship provided financial assistance and facilitated work experience placements for scholarship holders in rural regions. The intention was to assist with the training of doctors, introduce them to a rural centre and ultimately encourage medical graduates to practice within rural Australia.

3.3.3 *Allied Health Scholarship*

A scholarship of up to \$5,000 per year, up to three years for students undertaking undergraduate or post graduate studies in an allied health discipline. Applicants or their immediate families must be residents of Moree Plains Shire Council, and undergraduate applicants must have successfully completed their first year.

3.3.4 *The Medical/Allied Health Secondary School Scholarship*

Prior to 2012 the Gwydir Valley CGA offered a \$1000 scholarship to a Year 12 student either being home schooled within the Moree Plains Shire Council area or attending Moree Secondary College. The scholarship was designed to assist students who wanted to pursue a medical related career, it could be used on activities to assist the student meet university entrance requirements or provide them with a better understanding of their intended career. This scholarship is not actively being promoted at the moment.

3.3.5 *Westpac Rescue Helicopter Service*

Gwydir Valley CGA is a major supporter of the Westpac Rescue Helicopter Service. Every year the cotton growers charity dinner includes a Westpac Rescue Helicopter Auction, which has been a feature of the charity dinner for over 20 years. It is seen as a valuable contribution which the cotton industry can make to ensure that if there is a need, the facility is available to help members of the community.

3.4 Contacts

Gwydir Valley Cotton Growers Association

ABN: 93 442 174 064
100 Balo St (PO Box 824)
Moree, 2400

4 Access to Health services

The majority of the input to this submission is based on the experience of living and working in the Moree Plains Shire Council region of North West NSW.

4.1 Access to health and hospital services in rural, regional and remote NSW including service availability, barriers to access and quality of services

Changes in water availability either through climate or government policy has had a direct impact on the productivity of the region and the local economy. Analysis by the Murray Darling Basin Authority highlighted this relationship during the northern review and revealed that for both Moree and Collarenebri social and economic indicators declined through 2001 to 2011 including education, economic resources and disadvantage, resulting in an estimated 200 jobs lost due to the implementation of the Basin Plan in the region. This significant reduction in jobs has had flow on impacts on access to medical and educational services.

It is extremely difficult to get an appointment to see a doctor in Moree. There are two medical practices, wait times for an appointment at either of them is typically three to six weeks if one is even available. It is not uncommon for patients to be told to call back at a later stage to make an appointment.

The doctors at these practices are generally work upwards of 80 hours per week, which is putting increasing pressure on them. These doctors are typically attending patients at their surgeries as well as in the emergency department and the hospitals. Consideration needs to be put into how to support these doctors more effectively.

Recommendations:

- 1. We recommend that there be a concerted effort to encourage more doctors to live and work in regional centres. They need to be encouraged to join regional medical practices. It is important that as part of this, consideration is given to supporting students from regional NSW to study medicine.**
- 2. We recommend that more registrars be appointed to local hospitals to support the General Practitioners in the Emergency Departments, especially after hours.**

4.2 Patient experience, wait-times and quality of care in rural, regional and remote NSW and how it compares to metropolitan NSW

As detailed in 4.1 wait times for doctor appointments are unacceptably high.

The quality of care is generally good. However it is important to note that doctors working in regional areas must be more competent than most urban General Practitioners. They are often required to make decisions other General Practitioners do not have to make. Regional

doctors need more qualifications in fields such as obstetrics, paediatrics, aged care and anaesthetics.

Recommendations:

- 3. We recommend that doctors are not only encouraged to live and work in regional centres, but that they are supported in gaining additional training so that they can provide more care to regional patients.**

4.3 Health outcomes for people living in rural, regional and remote NSW

It is often reported that the health outcomes of people living in regional areas is poorer than that of people in metropolitan areas. This may be a direct result of the difficulty of getting an appointment. People looking to make appointments for annual check-ups or for referrals may tend to put it off due to the difficulty of getting the appointment. Until this constraint is addressed the health of regional people will remain below that of those in metropolitan regions.

Recommendations:

- 4. We recommend the NSW health department determine a mechanism which will facilitate a more efficient means to enable annual check-ups and referrals to be accomplished.**

5 Recommendations

As outlined in the above sections we recommend the following;

1. We recommend that there be a concerted effort to encourage more doctors to live and work in regional centres. They need to be encouraged to join regional medical practices. It is important that as part of this, consideration is given to supporting students from regional NSW to study medicine.
2. We recommend that more registrars be appointed to local hospitals to support the General Practitioners in the Emergency Departments, especially after hours.
3. We recommend that doctors are not only encouraged to live and work in regional centres, but that they are supported in gaining additional training so that they can provide more care to regional patients.
4. We recommend the NSW health department determine a mechanism which will facilitate a more efficient means to enable annual check-ups and referrals to be accomplished.

6 Conclusion

The Gwydir CGA believe that there is a significant issue associated with the health services in regional NSW. The most critical challenge is the lack of General Practitioners to look after the community. Those who are living and working in regional NSW are in need of significant support to enable them to be upskilled to provide the necessary services for their regions. Additionally there needs to be more registrars in regional hospitals and a more efficient way to facilitate annual check-ups and referrals for regional patients.