

“Speaking up for Regional Australia”

National Conference Communiqué

Sustainable Economic Growth for Regional Australia

SEGRA 2010 Townsville 18-21 October

Regions: delivering a big Australia

This communiqué was prepared by:

Simon Boughey*

Kate Charters**

Peter Waterman*

*SEGRA National Steering Committee Member

** Director of Management Solutions (Qld) and
Convenor, **SEGRA** Conference

Preamble

SEGRA is recognised as Australia's most credible independent voice on issues affecting regional Australia. The key feature of the annual national conference is that it acts as a watershed in opening up debate, discussing new ideas and identifying critical regional issues at a national level. **SEGRA** attracts champions of regional development. It is not linked to any one sector - government, industry or not for profit and its thinking is not limited by boundaries. It is driven by practitioners working in communities driving the regional agenda.

The value and importance of local empowerment has been a particular focus of the current minister for Regional Development the Hon Simon Crean and this document provides an opportunity for your input into developing creative long term solutions that will unleash the real potential of regions. Please take the opportunity to read this conference overview as well as the proposed future actions and have your say by emailing the **SEGRA** Secretariat at info@segra.com.au

About **SEGRA**

The Sustainable Economic Growth for Regional Australia, **SEGRA**, Conference was established in 1997 in response to growing concern about the absence of a single forum in which practitioners, business, Government and researchers with a deep commitment to regional Australia could discuss issues and advance options and solutions for the future.

SEGRA is now an annual event drawing over 250 delegates from across Australia, with a reputation as Australia's most credible and influential voice on issues affecting regional Australia. A key feature is that it operates as a multi disciplinary policy community drawing from all sectors and geographical locations.

SEGRA is committed to providing:

- challenging, thought provoking keynote addresses by Australia's leading social, political, economic and environmental thinkers;
- exemplars of some of Australia's outstanding regional development success stories; and
- providing a mechanism for drawing together and advancing knowledge and issues.

In keeping with its role, *SEGRA* focuses on practical and applied presentations and seeks to influence the nation's regional development agenda. It is encouraged by the new political environment post the 2010 Federal election and the work being done across the nation by State and Territory governments, Local Government, Regional Development Australia authorities, Universities, the business sector, the not for profit sector, Indigenous communities and the broad spectrum of other communities around the country.

The *SEGRA* Secretariat is committed to profiling a different regional location each year to capture local flavour and enable greater participation from specific regions. Recently *SEGRA* conferences have been held in:

- 2009 Kalgoorlie-Boulder, WA;
- 2008 Albury, NSW;
- 2007 Wollongong, Illawarra Region NSW; and
- 2006 Launceston, Northern Tasmania.

An overview of the 2010 Townsville conference program, theme and action agendas can be found in Appendix 1 and a copy of all the conference papers presented can be found at www.segra.com.au

National Context for Regional Development in Australia in 2010

The 2010 Australian Federal Government election resulted in a substantial refocusing on regionalism and regional development in Australia. The Labor Government's agreement with the two rural independents included an announcement of a \$10 billion expenditure program for regional Australia. This commitment aimed to deliver better services, infrastructure and opportunities for economic development.

As part of this program, funding from the Health and Hospitals Fund and the Education Investment Fund will be exclusively open for investments in regional Australia, delivering additional investments worth up to \$1.8 billion in health and up to \$500 million in education. An additional \$1.4 billion will also be provided for investments in infrastructure and the economic development of regional Australia (including \$573 million for the 55 Regional Development Authorities [RDAs] to bid for local projects), as well as a \$6 billion Regional Infrastructure Fund and the National Broadband Network.

In conjunction with the increased expenditure, Simon Crean was appointed the Minister for Regional Australia, Regional Development and Local Government as well as Minister for The Arts. A new Regional Australia and Regional Development Committee of Cabinet has been established to ensure strategic direction is provided on community priorities as well as ensure coordination across portfolios (Crean, 2010a). Coordination across portfolios will, according

to Crean (2010a), “play a critical, whole-of-Government coordination role to ensure that:

- Regional Australia enjoys a fair distribution of national resources;
- Government decisions take genuine account of the needs and priorities of regional communities;
- Decisions of the Expenditure Review Committee are taken in the full knowledge of their impact on regional Australia; and
- A “breakdown of the budget which more clearly shows the pattern and priority of Commonwealth spending across all regions of the country” (Crean, 2010a).

The Federal Government has also indicated that the new approach will focus very much on local empowerment. The Government believes that local people are best placed to make decisions about their economic, social and environmental wellbeing (Crean, 2010a). The Government’s focus on localism and regionalism in regards to regional development means that the future role of RDAs will be pivotal in ensuring local decision-making is provided throughout the three levels of government.

Simon Crean defines a region as a community of interest focused on achieving sustainable development and sees the role of RDAs as a touchstone in the 55 regions across Australia where they are represented. He suggests that RDAs will be critical to driving local solutions and developing key indicators across government portfolios ([Crean, 2010b](#)).

Challenges and opportunities for regional Australia in 2010

At the *SEGRA* 2010 conference it was clear that regional Australia continues to face enormous changes and challenges to sustainability and economic growth. Major discussions were conducted around:

1. The new political landscape in Canberra and the Federal Government and how that will translate to funding and services to be provided to the rural, regional and remote communities across Australia.
2. The questions do we want a Big Australia or Sustainable Australia; can we have both?
3. The role of the 55 Regional Development Authorities across Australia and the links into State and Territory regional development processes; Local Government and other local governance bodies such Natural Resource Management Groups, Regional Organisation of Councils, Indigenous bodies and how localism and coherence will be achieved.

4. Variability in local communities and their economic sustainability as part of regional, state and national economic development decisions and consequent:
 - a. impacts in a wide range of existing land use and economic areas;
 - b. activities including minerals and energy, agriculture and grazing;
 - c. industries, small business development and reinventing communities that are going through change.
5. Climate Change and the adaptation to new conditions and associated impacts on energy availability and usage, agricultural practices, water management and government mitigation strategies, especially in the light of the failure of Copenhagen and the opportunities that arise for regional Australia to lead a clean tech innovative agenda.
6. Social and cultural impacts associated with effects on employment availability, skills and sustainability, cost of housing and cost of living issues in regional areas, location and population mobility particularly in remote and outer regional Australia.

The challenge remains is to ensure regional frameworks are put in place that act to:

- enable benefits to arise equally;
- address anticipated growth issues including providing and housing a skilled work force;
- establish appropriate and adequate social and financial infrastructure; and
- take into account for the often cyclical shifts in the economy.

The emerging regional agenda

Delegates to *SEGRA* are traditionally champions of regional Australia. Four key themes emerged as critical to advancing the emerging regional agenda over the next decade. There were an abundance of innovative solutions put forward that are captured in the following section.

Key Issues and challenges to emerge were:

1. Defining Regional Australia
2. Indigenous Economic Development
3. Sustainability
4. Population Growth and Settlement patterns

1. Defining Regional Australia?

Define “to show something clearly especially in shape or outline; boundary edge or certainty”

Much discussion has taken place recently, including at **SEGRA**, about what is a region. In some respects such debate falls short of the point. All economic, social, environmental and cultural activities are essentially open and relational rather than bounded.

Administratively regions are a useful concept in creating boundary and certainty but in operational terms regions and the relationships within and across them are in fact not limited. The essence of region is in fact how economic, social and service activities are connected.

The ability to develop a regional identity that captures this connectedness will differ according to needs and interests. The emerging challenge is how to include the concept of regionalism (connectedness) and regional outcomes within the national outlook. There was strong endorsement of the need for broad recognition that a strong regional Australia is a key to achieving national goals for our economic, social, environmental and cultural future.

Whilst it is true that regions that have been identified as successful often have a specific unifying identity; this alone does not provide sufficient resolve to drive regional growth. We need to ensure we continue to build on the successes and learn from the failures of regionalism through communities and organisations working in rural, region and remote Australia

More often the hallmark of a successful region is its capacity to identify, create and maintain collaborative alliances and strategic paths that delivered on regional growth goals..

An emerging issue at the conference was Australia’s maritime future and its relationship with regional Australia. Australia’s maritime domain covers 13.86 million km² in area and that we have the longest, ice-free coastline in the world at 37,000 Km and a total of 70 000 km and the value of Australia’s maritime interests exceeds \$43.4 Billion. This topic also received considerable media interest. In a paper by Prof Marcus Haward it was noted that Australia’s marine industries are a fast growing sector of our economy which: adds almost \$100 billion to the national economy; employs over 1 million Australians; earns almost \$20 billion in exports; and contributes almost \$6 billion in taxes. (AIMS Strategic Directions 2007)

There was also discussion about the increased role of Northern Australia. As India and China are poised to challenge the USA’s maritime superiority, shipping lanes could change offering opportunities for northern Australia particularly in terms of food production and developing maritime opportunities around the coast of Australia for ports and security.

Delegates raised the issues of:

1. Talking about regions and regional networks and linkages rather than the key cities/towns in regions. Delegates raised the critical role of ‘having a sense of place’
2. Understanding and implementing true regional collaboration (as opposed to co operation and coordination) and building strategic partnerships. Features identified included the management of risk, power sharing, resource sharing and establishment of regional identities with legislative legitimacy. ([Elaine Carbines](#) and [Basil Ahyick](#))
3. Governance and regionalism:- What are the best approaches and models to establish partnerships and regional alliances that:
 - truly reflect localism;
 - allow leveraging opportunities;
 - value add on investment and effectively deliver the most efficient use of existing resources;
 - build social capital and capacities of communities to act and speak up for what they need; they want and would like provided;
 - Devolve decision-making to the regions.([Brian Dollery](#), [The Hon. Paul Lucas MP](#), [Michael Campbell\(a\)](#) and [Paul Martyn](#))
4. What are the drivers and disincentives for regionalization? This also raised the issue of how to manage and govern regions with low population and wide geographic areas that usually have are at a distance from decision makers in capital cities. ([Lieutenant Colonel John Hathaway](#) and [Mark Cully](#))
5. Technology and in particular the roll out of the National Broadband Network was seen as critical for advancing e-health, e-education and e-business and linking communities around the country and to the world. Concern was expressed that training and professional development opportunities would need to be provided to bring regional Australia in line with the larger urban areas regarding the extensive business opportunities the National Broadband Network would create.
6. There was considerable discussion about need to build on Indigenous engagement in terms of economic capacity and contribution beyond supply of services. This is discussed in its own section later in the paper. ([Kaely Woods](#))
7. The basis and criteria for collection and allocation of resources was high on the agenda. Considerations included:
 - Royalties for Regions – how does it differ from fair and equitable provision of services from existing funds; ([Assoc Prof Paul McLeod](#))
 - need to have better spatial accounting of income and expenditure – capital flows in and out of regions, - royalties, resource rent, superannuation out of regions; economic and social cost of distance from markets;
 - what indicators of regional impact should apply, who makes those decisions. ([SEGRA 2009 National Australia Summit](#))

2. Sustainability

Regions are uniquely well – placed to contribute to national goals in water and food security, sustainability, and innovation. Regional populations are physically close to, and often more intimately linked to, their natural environments placing a natural interface between humans and their surrounds. Regional areas cover vast geographic areas with the potential to develop renewable energies in solar, wind and geothermal.

Regions therefore provide real opportunities for planners to learn from the impacts of climate change, and translate these into precursors to moving people away from the coast in regional areas and the coastal hinterland.

It was seen as critical that we act to build on these intrinsic regional advantages and ensure sustainable regions that have: the appropriate mix of land use that maintains and reinvigorates biodiversity as well as resource development and primary industry; responding to the need for climate change adaptation by employing strategies that maximise the benefits of specializing in clean technology and renewable energy and resource industries. There is also a significant capacity in regions for cutting edge research and development of “Preferred Futures”- sustainability policies in relative Greenfield areas. This could be achieved for example by developing inter and intra-regional climate change adaptive strategies that highlight; highly vulnerable areas/localities; priorities for action; impediments and potential barriers to achieving desired outcomes; tools and techniques for implementing adaptive responses; and simple measures for assessing success. ([Claire Penniceard](#))

There are also significant sustainability considerations for regional Australia. Environmental sustainability is about competing land use and economic growth, technology and personal consumption. There are real economic difficulty in the delivery of infrastructure and services e.g. electricity to regional areas. ([Jim Chisholm](#))

Technological advances can also create greater demands on the environment that need to be balanced when attracting people to regional areas that are amongst our most productive lands.

The focus on sustainability will still need to focus on the real requirements to reduce consumption. It was noted that consumption can be driven by intensity of urban living and that consumption can be reduced by achieving a better work life balance.

([Dr Graham Turner](#) and [Dr Greg Picker](#))

3. Population growth and distribution

Decentralising of population is gaining momentum as one of the strategies to resolve Australia's population growth issues in terms of settlement patterns. It is also generally recognised that sustainable regional growth will create an upward spiral of improved services and infrastructure. Underpinning this is the need to attract business and people to regions. "Major cities are a way of the past, we need to develop key regional cities like Townsville". Discussion revolved around historical outcomes from previous decentralisation models and application of these learnings. Delegates spoke about the renewed interest in urban hierarchies and strategic development and planning of settlement patterns within regions. What sort of planning should we have in regional areas such as Geelong - do we go for the hub and spoke model or develop new approaches. There was strong comment that decentralisation models must be used to enhance regional areas. National priorities for infrastructure and how the regions can benefit from this investment, needed further articulation.

[\(Dorte Ekelund\)](#)

Whilst regional areas can offer better liveability this needs to be managed sustainably – regions need to be seen as offering 'city change' rather than 'lifestyle/sea/tree change often associated with large blocks of land, urban sprawl and concomitant infrastructure costs. Marketing regional strengths for livability, employment and educational opportunities may make regional centers more attractive however there is still the issue of breaking down urban/rural barriers. [\(Susan Kinnear\(b\)\)](#)

Regional education (universities and other tertiary facilities) have the capacity to be key players in the innovation systems of regional areas for example can provide skilled workforce, create a work pool of professional people One paper presented on applied research showing regions can secure mobile skilled workers and retain them . There is a need to identify key cities to develop rather than 'letting it happen' – what criteria to use, what services need to be in place, when etc. Fast tracking of skilled migrants is helping staff regional Australia with doctors, pharmacists, teachers, construction professionals however what are the implications and social policy arising from this? It was also observed that cultural richness of a region can be enhanced by new migration policies from the cities and from overseas.

[\(Jessica van der Waag and Simon Lyas\)](#)

It is important to make new towns and growing regional towns a place that people want to live and not just populated by fly-in-fly-out or drive-in –drive-out workers. What do we need for critical mass for our regions and communities to survive and thrive?

[\(Mark Cully\)](#)

4. Indigenous Economic Development

The Deputy CEO of Indigenous Business Australia (IBA), [Ms Kaely Woods](#), spoke about Building Indigenous Business Capability in Remote Australia. IBA help and support I.B's with loans and general business advice, marketing and providing business workshops. IBA focuses on:

- Enterprise identification & evaluation
- Client screening
- Reality testing
- Establishing simple business management procedures
- Providing ongoing support to Indigenous businesses
- Panel discussion

Regional areas typically host large Indigenous populations. Support to Indigenous communities needs to provide economic opportunities not just social services. The need to build on indigenous engagement was spoken about.

***SEGRA* - Regional Australian Champions**

SEGRA is driven by regional champions – delegates work in areas affecting regions and have their own stories of success. Much of the discussion arising from previous conferences and again with the key-note and concurrent session presentations of the 2010 Conference centred around the need to focus on and confront some of the fundamental ways in which regional development policy frameworks, approaches and implementation instruments are developed and applied. There was a clear sense at *SEGRA* 2010 that, now more than ever, these challenges needed strong, interrelated and sustainable frameworks that work within regions and articulate across regions be they administrative regions or areas defined by natural or social boundaries.

There was vigorous and enthusiastic discussion about what regional Australia could look like in the future in the face of a wide range of challenges. This ‘**can do**’ attitude again was evident at *SEGRA* 2010 with the abundance of case studies and shared experiences demonstrating Australia’s rich capacity to overcome adversity.

The following proposals and actions were drawn from presentations, panel discussions, forums and informal network discussions. They have been grouped around 9 themes, as follows:

- Regions being able to deliver;
- Regional issues for the future;
- Economic drivers for the regions;
- Indigenous economic development;
- Successful approaches in Regional Australia;
- Regional Development Strategies and planning for sustainable regions;
- Managing Natural resources;
- Energising your local social and cultural capital; and
- Developing tools to help your community create and carry out change.

Synthesising the proposed actions alternative frameworks arising from the 9 proposed areas of action outlined above include regional Australia acting to achieve the following:

1. The need for a change in the way we view regions and how they should develop into the future – listen to the locals;
2. Models of success are there for all regions to tap into and develop; ([Assoc Prof Geoff Cockfield](#) and [Assoc Prof Jeremy Buultjens](#))
3. The need to think outside the square to create change and a new way forward;
4. Regions and communities speaking up for what they believe in and what they would like to see in their patch.
5. All levels of government need to take a new approach to regionalism and the regions in their state and territory and see regions as a opportunities not an economic drain. ([Michael Campbell\(b\)](#))
6. Frameworks for long term sustainable funding across economic, social, environmental and cultural programs need to be maintained by government and the corporate sector;
7. A fully integrated technology platform could transform Australia and overcome the tyranny of distance for e-health, e-education, e-business and e-marketing; ([Carol Hanlon](#))
8. Innovative regional planning can bring benefits for the whole community, you just all need to work together; ([Prof David Adams](#))
9. Developing your future framework for your community doesn't have to be a chore - visions can be inspiring and lead to great benefits in your community;
10. Enjoy the journey creating change and benefits for your region and community; and
11. Minister Simon Crean's, opening speech to conference was titled: "Boosting Regional Australia – making the most of a once in a lifetime opportunity."- so let's do it and create the change we have always wanted!

Focussing on the future

Key strategic actions proposed by delegates at the *SEGRA* 2010 included the following in no particular order:

1. A strong and decisive role for 55 Regional Development Australia linked to the agreement the Federal government has entered into with each State and Territory government and Local government.
2. What were the optimal ways to spend the nearly \$600 million allocated to the RDA's. Should this be devolved to the RDA's to be used as funds that could be leveraged with other stakeholder's or be administered centrally by the Minister and relevant agency in Canberra?
3. Ensuring spatial accounting that includes all income and expenditure derived from regions e.g. superannuation
4. The need for collaborative investment structures – disenchantment with public private partnerships as a model for much of regional Australia and the alternative models to maximise results ;
5. Expanding recognition of the values of the quadruple bottom line –linking economic development with tourism, social and cultural capital;
6. Actively requiring liveability considerations in resource development as a new way forward;
7. Building on the multicultural strengths in communities to create change and build harmony;
8. Encouraging visionary communities and mapping how to get there;
9. Tapping into local skills to overcome crises and look to the future to become strong again;
10. Understanding and being skilled to use networking technology to overcome the tyranny of distance;
11. Recognising Indigenous culture and their economic capacity and cultural activities
12. Using effective community engagement to not just discuss issues but get things done;
13. Tapping into the expertise of the mobile regional population;
14. Driving community projects to resolve bureaucratic processes linked to water and energy;
15. Learning from each other - what works in your region, may not work in others but we can all learn from others and their endeavours;
16. Ensuring Infrastructure projects benefit every region large and small (not just corridors through regions);
17. Climate adaptation and benefits for your community; and
18. Case studies are the way to go and we should develop a library and database for them, so we can all learn from others.

Next Steps

The *SEGRA* National Steering Committee has formed a small working party to consider the above proposals with a view to consolidating a number of clear issues and ideas to take forward to:

- First Ministers and Ministers and all relevant agencies in Federal and State/Territory Governments;
- People working in and representing Local Government;
- Indigenous community leaders;
- The educational and research sector;
- The business and not for profit sectors;
- The proposed Regional Policy Centre and other key national organisations dealing with rural, regional and remote issues and development.
- The 55 Regional Development Australia authorities set up across the country; and
- Other interested communities around Australia from large rural urban centres to the smallest towns.

This will include the identification of issue agendas, availability of, or need for supporting research and data, and potential policy actions for consideration. Following this a draft paper will be made available before a final copy is distributed.

Please contact Kate Charters if you or your organization would like to:

- Contribute your ideas; or
- Provide feedback and comments
- Lead or be part of a research project.

Members of the *SEGRA* National Steering Committee are available to make power point presentations of the Communiqué by teleconference or web-based technology to Councils, Boards, agencies and the like on request.

Please first make initial contact with:

Kate Charters (*SEGRA* Convenor)
Management Solutions (Qld) Pty Ltd
GPO Box 3201
Brisbane QLD 4001
Ph 07 3210 0021
kate@segra.com.au

Don't forget to put in your diaries, the *SEGRA* 2011 conference, to be held in the City of Geelong and the G21 Region, 24- 27 October 2011

References

Crean, S., (2010a) 'Driving Economic Growth – A Regional Dimension', National Press Club Speech, Wednesday 29 September 2010

Crean, S., (2010b) 'Keynote Speech' Sustainable Economic Growth for Regional Australia (SEGRA) Conference, 19-21 October 2010, Jupiters, Townsville

Appendix 1: Program theme and action agendas

Conference theme

Regions: delivering a big Australia

Australia has a highly urbanised population and it is often seen as city centric in its decision making. Regional Australia is often relegated to nostalgia and our sense of a bush heritage. It is sobering to note that in 2007 the ABS identified only 18 non-capital cities in Australia with populations exceeding 70 000 people; this number reaches 36 if cities over 30 000 are included.

The last few years however has seen the bush thrown into a new spotlight. In considering a big Australia and more recently a sustainable Australia, stronger relationships are now being drawn between resource growth and development and the impacts for regional communities; population growth and regionalism; northern Australia and global shopping; food security and land use.

SEGRA has been at the forefront of these issues for well over a decade. Pioneering the links between policy, research, and practice SEGRA offers a unique opportunity to consider these critical issues at macro and micro levels.

In plenary sessions, speakers of national standing contributed their ideas and expertise around a range of cutting edge national issues: growth management, limits to growth, population dispersal, maritime policy and remote Australia. In the concurrent sessions delegates choose from over 40 practitioners' presentations demonstrating locality based responses and to the range of challenges regions confront.

In 2010 many regions, presented on their wide strategic planning for sustainable economic development – attracting investment, securing infrastructure, achieving regional and inter-regional cooperation at government, community and business levels.

Other papers will provided insights into developing community capacity, community well being and services. Speakers will present innovative responses to energy provision, network business development. There were some cutting edge case studies on community engagement, regional arts programs and green industry development. All delegates had the opportunity to put forward new ideas what worked, what didn't, what next and as always to discuss their own issues and concerns and share their own successes.

Key agenda items

- Sustainable regions and a big Australia
- Regional cities
- Land rights and economic opportunities for Indigenous people
- Regional competitiveness and productivity
- Governance – inter jurisdictional co operation
- The developing role for Northern Australia
- Regional Development Australia operating across Australia, their way forward and a way to make a difference