



SEGRA COVID-19 Special Communique

Speaking up for Regional Australia

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This Communique is a special edition specifically focusing on the impacts of and responses to COVID-19 on rural, regional and remote Australia. It identifies key issues and identifies potential policy and practice actions. It is a summary of discussions from our **SEGRA COVID-19 and Regional Australia Conversation Series** and does not purport to represent a shared view by **SEGRA** National Steering Committee or participants. The videos of these conversations are available on our [website](#) and our [Youtube-channel](#).

About **SEGRA**

SEGRA is Australia's premier organisation on regional issues. It is recognised as Australia's most credible independent voice on issues affecting regional Australia. Its strategic goal is to assist regional, rural and remote Australia to source and identify the knowledge, techniques and skills regions required to achieve successful economic growth and development.

SEGRA is committed to ensuring that regional Australia is fully considered as part of the framing of the national agenda.

SEGRA, established in 1997, provides a unique opportunity for all sections of the Australian community, rural and urban, to explore the key issues affecting regional,

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rural and remote Australia and be part of providing positive sustainable outcomes to ensure future prosperity.

SEGRA has led the way in being cross-sectoral and multi-disciplinary, bringing together practitioners, policy makers, researchers, business, community, health, social services and the not-for-profit sector.

SEGRA is a practice community of over 11000 people representing economic, community, health, social services and sustainability practitioners, all levels of government, researchers, elected representatives and business.

As such, it is the upholder of extraordinary collective expertise across regional, rural and remote Australia and is widely respected by governments, universities and regional development practitioners.

SEGRA is unique in that it is grass roots and practitioner driven. It has particular expertise in the area of implementation of government policy and projects.

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10 Underpinning Principles

1. **Refocus** your strategic and business plans including risk assessments of supply and demand chains, continuity plans, relaunch strategy
2. **Expand** digital capability - embrace consumer online shift, improve internet skills
3. **Recognise** the mental health impacts of drought, fire, COVID-19, social isolation, work casualization
4. **Strengthen** economic diversification
5. **Encourage** institutional knowledge transfer
6. **Communicate:** the right information to the right people at the right time
7. **Facilitate** fast access to support package
8. **Retain** economic vitality: create new networks or support existing and client focus, seek out and encourage innovators
9. **Strengthen** place-based responses
10. **Utilise** data to: understand your region – which industries have been impacted, where are the opportunities for growth

Across our 19 conversations we canvassed:

1. How to sustain the social fabric of our communities and build resilience?
2. How do we retain economic capability? and;
3. How to invest now to build capability?

Potential action agendas

1. How to sustain the social fabric of our communities and build resilience?

The year 2020 has been devastating for many parts of regional, rural and remote Australia dealing with floods, bushfires, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Whilst many regions are resilient, community leaders need to be very much at the forefront working to maintain and build resilience in their communities. A key issue identified in our webinars have been the importance of locally relevant communication – getting the right information to the right people at the right time. There needs to be strong communication strategies from government and Chambers of Commerce and Industry. Governments at all levels have provided regularly updated and useful information. A list of relevant websites can be found [here](#).

It was noted leaders don't need all the answers – your teams will be having good ideas too.

Communities in regions, rural and remote Australia will suffer significant impacts from the loss of casual jobs especially in the retail, services and hospitality industry (estimated to be 1 in 4 jobs). These jobs are traditionally filled by casual and young labour. Strategies going forward need to acknowledge the importance of younger people and seasonal workers to rural economies.

One of the highest risks will relate to the mental well-being of individuals in the regions and it will be important to promote access to mental health services and telehealth as a matter of high priority. Particularly vulnerable groups will be the already socially isolated, people with disabilities and people other social difficulties.

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This being said, it must also be acknowledged that there has been some rediscovery of the caring community. Regional, rural and remote communities have an advantage over large urban agglomerations in that they traditionally live with social isolation restrictions due to geographical distances.

Many of the inter-agency arrangements formed during crises could be useful mechanisms for co-ordinating response in COVID-19. Mackay Regional Council has established an Economic Resource Group – an interagency group including RDA, EDOs, State Development, Chamber of Commerce and Resource Industry Network to tackle economic impacts of COVID-19.

Community engagement, particularly by local government is vital to retain trust and avoid the negative side effects of social isolation. Enable crisis story telling within communities

Mainstreet events and festivals post COVID-19 may assist in rebuilding community identity. Local innovators are already using zoom to maintain connectivity e.g. musicians, libraries and community hubs. There may be an opportunity for local councils to make Zoom more accessible.

RDA Darling Downs South West has been involved in a project that asked the community to define its own resilience indicators. Those identified in order of priority include: economy, infrastructure and services, natural environment, health and well-being, fulfilment and connectivity, community and decision making.

Many more people are working from home and have a presence in their communities during the week. This may be an ongoing trend as employers become familiar with out of office workplaces. This may change the nature of city suburbs. Regional, rural and remote Australia already have the edge in terms of remote working practices.

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The trend towards place based and ground up initiatives for future actions and solutions was strongly supported.

2. How do we retain economic capability?

Now is a critical time for businesses in regional, rural and remote Australia to re-examine their strategic plans and continuity plans. It is also a valuable time to bring marketing up to date and ensure a presence in their customers' minds. Businesses need to be ready to start up immediately once the opportunity arises.

Budgets and cash flow need to be redone/reviewed regularly with new assumptions – it will not necessarily be a linear process. Businesses may need to identify a few key revenue providers to nurture/retain.

Businesses need to take advantage of the positive assistance being made available especially through the different levels of government.

Businesses need to develop risk profiles in both supply and demand chains. A refocus on local procurement going forward may be appropriate.

Business need to prepare for changes in consumer behaviour – e.g. more use of digital technology.

Create a cluster of mainstream businesses to optimise opportunities or growth and renewal.



Regions, rural and remote areas need **all** of their Mainstreet to survive – the sooner they are back and operating, the better. There will not be much lead time so businesses should be working on their ‘back to business plan now’.

It will be important for businesses to develop digital literacy – this is already happening as people are forced towards using the internet. Research would indicate there is an emerging trend to the development of small businesses on the internet, many started by women.

Some businesses will not survive in their current form – these businesses need to be looking at start-up opportunities and ways they might diversify. Business need to be using their down time to identify global opportunities and to work on new ideas to test what makes a good idea.

Networks between regional hubs, local economic development officers, Chamber of Commerce and universities will be essential. Universities could play an important facilitating role – many good ideas turn into small businesses rather than global businesses in the absence of a critical mass of expertise. Physical clusters of entrepreneurs will become virtual clusters of entrepreneurs.

Regional universities play a critical role in their communities and need to review and update their community engagement strategies to reflect the impacts of COVID-19 and how they will move forward post pandemic. This is an important opportunity for communities and universities to work together, particularly in terms of knowledge transfers.

Know your region’s identity and values, understand trends. It is of great importance of getting accurate data to inform decision making – two sources were identified: .id and Remplan. We are all making decisions without all the information, but we need

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to move forward with the information we have and then review our decisions as more information becomes available.

Be prepared to fail forward and move quickly.

Identify your worst-case scenario and make peace with it. Overcome your fears in order to move forward.

Do not evolve to do something different, but evolve to **be** something different.

Councils have a number of ways to support local businesses through waiving various licence and other fees. It is noted that this will deplete council's resources to do other things.

A number of brand new businesses are starting up and need to be supported. Other businesses will experience long periods of recovery.

Chambers of Commerce and Industry need to work closely together and have up to date knowledge about where the gaps and barriers are. Albany Chamber of Commerce and Industry has been conducting surveys that are available [here](#).

3. How to invest now to build capability?

People need to move from crisis management to strategic leading by planning tactical short term opportunities. Establish your own local buy group or delivery group (for example [Still Here](#)).

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Look at businesses in new ways and try to evolve yourself and your business – stay client focused. It is important to maintain customer loyalty and visibility.

Keep generating brand awareness – continue to communicate with the market using social media platforms. In Mackay, the local businesses have established a Facebook page which had 9558 members within a month. Mackay Regional Council has also set up an online campaign – “Unite, Adapt Believe” to encourage and support business.

Businesses need to keep their finger on the pulse of the staff in the organisation. Communicate every day with your team if they are working remotely.

The gap in digital connectivity is significant for businesses moving forward as well as business start-ups. Internet access continues to be high on the agenda for regional, rural and remote Australia. The need is only going to become more urgent.

Regions need to be actively considering how they can be best positioned for recovery – where might well-being be boosted (e.g. Whittlesea Council resources list).

Hold the tension – have a sense of where you want to be in three years’ time. Check in with your attitude as this will be reflected in your leadership.

Assess your company goals regularly and review them constantly: FAST – focus, accountability, simplicity and transparency.

Regions need to consider how they can be best prepared to be first movers in the post COVID-19 recovery.

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Encourage people to move to regions by actively developing professional career-entry jobs that are high skill and have a career path. As COVID-19 makes businesses become more digitally savvy and mobile there may be opportunities to attract businesses to lifestyle regions.

Try and mitigate the impact on social clubs during this period and help them develop a reactivation strategy.

Regional universities need to be an important player in regional development – need to be providing graduates with skills for 2030's.

Local governments will have some vulnerabilities as a result of loss of income.

Local government has been a major communicator at the local level and can play a significant role in multi-agency co-ordination.

Local mechanisms for sharing tailored information is critical – mail outs are still a highly effective mechanism.

Stay actively involved with your local Regional Development Australia (RDA). They are being increasingly asked to provide feedback to government on key issues from their areas leading to better tailoring of policy and programs.

VET sector and other training agencies need to be ready for the new business models that emerge.

Advocacy for internet and mobile access is vital.

Encourage businesses to be more networked and know each other better – thereby creating a better entrepreneurial culture. All levels of government need to be actively

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involved in creating an entrepreneurial culture in regional Australia. Some regional universities have research and innovation hubs. Need to identify key individuals in your region who have an entrepreneurial proclivity. Establish a private Facebook group for local businesses to support each other. Chambers of Commerce and Industry can be pivotal in upskilling members and providing advice.

Develop virtual communities of entrepreneurs now.

People in regions need to understand the best approaches and business models for entrepreneurial activity and make links to create knowledges of scale.

Look for opportunities to create circular economies.

Link local businesses into anticipated projects earlier so they can prepare for when the projects go to tender.

Stronger links/co-operation around hard and soft infrastructure development for example actively support entrepreneurs in regional Australia.

Need to turn big ideas into best ideas – local values, local leadership, design thinking, investment attraction.

Recognise that some businesses will not survive this crisis but this does not stop you having a new big business idea.

There is a significant chasm between innovators and early adopters (16%) and followers (68%) and laggards (16%). Need to focus effort on the 85% who are not the early adopters. Regions need as many innovators and early adopters as possible. There is a window of approximately 3 months to pivot.

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Future Conversations include:

1. Keeping employees, customers, and suppliers safe – enhanced workplace safety standards.
2. Rebuilding confidence – partnership between governments and industry.
3. Economic support must transition from 'life-support' to 'acceleration'.

For more information about **SEGRA** please contact:

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Useful websites can be sourced at:

<https://segra.com.au/latest-news/a-conversation-for-regional-australia-about-covid-19/>

This site includes the map that is tracking our conversation schematically around the four key content areas of Business, Health and Wellbeing, Lifestyle and Education

(<https://flowfunnels.com.au/maps/NTg2OQ>).

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Conversation participants and links to the webinar

[Conversation 1: Managing COVID-19 impacts on regional, rural and remote Australia](#)

Rod Macdonald, **SEGRA** National Steering Committee

Tony Wright, Chief Executive Officer, Limestone Coast Local Government Association

[Conversation 2: Rural Economies](#)

Ben Lyons, Rural Economies Centre of Excellence, University of Southern Queensland

[Conversation 3: Building Social Capacity](#)

Professor Jim Cavaye, University of Tasmania

[Conversation 4: Local Government Perspectives](#)

Cr Anita Rank, Mayor, Glenelg Shire Council

Fiona Gaske, Chair, RDA Darling Downs South West

Trudi Bartlett, Chief Executive Officer, RDA Darling Downs South West

[Conversation 5: Encouraging Entrepreneurship during COVID-19](#)

Colin Kinner, Chief Executive Officer, Startup Onramp

Chad Renando, Chief Executive Officer, Startup Status

[Conversation 6: Leadership during a time of Crisis](#)

Sara Hales, Chief Executive Officer, The Bold Effect

Dave Clare, Dave Clare Consultancy

[Conversation 7: Keeping your Mainstreet Alive during COVID-19 Vol. 1](#)

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Robert Prestipino, Vital Places

Conversation 8: Keeping your Mainstreet Alive during COVID-19 Vol. 2

Robert Prestipino, Vital Places

Teona Cousin, Manager Economic Development and Tourism, Mackay Regional Council

Conversation 9: The Role of Universities in Regional Economic Development

Fiona Nash, Strategic Advisor, Charles Sturt University

Narelle Pearse, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Central Queensland University

Conversation 10: The Role of Regional Chambers of Commerce and Industry during the COVID-19 Crisis

Ben Flynn, Chief Executive Officer, Geelong Chamber of Commerce and Industry

Benita Cattalina, Chief Executive Officer, Albany Chamber of Commerce and Industry

Conversation 11: Improving Collaboration in the Rebuild Process

Phil Preston, Collaboration Expert and author of Connecting Profit With Purpose

Donna Argus, Manager at NSW Ageing and Disability Commission, and Disaster Welfare Area Coordinator

Conversation 12: The Impacts on Tourism and COVID-19

Cr Bob Manning, Mayor, Cairns Regional Council

Mark Olsen, Chief Executive Officer, Tourism Tropical North Queensland

Conversation 13: The Opportunities of the Circular Economy

Leanne Kemp, Queensland's Chief Entrepreneur

Michael Eales, Strategy Designer from Business Models Inc.

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Conversation 14: Investment Attraction Post COVID-19

Steve Torso, Founder, Wholesale Investor

Genevieve Mortimer, Strategist, Climate-KIC

Conversation 15: Preparing for Post COVID-19 Recovery

Todd Rohl, Chief Executive Officer, Toowoomba Chamber of Commerce and Industry

Peter Homan, Chief Executive Officer, Southern Queensland Country Tourism

Cr Paul Antonio, Mayor, Toowoomba Regional Council

Conversation 16: Preparing for Post COVID-19 Recovery – a Federal Perspective

Sue Kilpatrick, Chair, Regional Development Australia Tasmania

Craig Perkins, Chief Executive Officer, Regional Development Australia Tasmania

Megan Dixon, Director of Regional Development, Regional Development Australia Orana

Conversation 17: The Opportunities for Ecotourism and Geotourism in the Post COVID-19 Environment

Rod Hillman, Chief Executive Officer, Ecotourism Australia

Angus M Robinson, Co-ordinator, National Geotourism Strategy, Australian Geoscience Council Inc.

Conversation 18: Beyond crises: Shaping the Parameters of Regional Viability

Anthony Hogan, Honorary Professor, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Sydney

MC: Ian Doyle, Executive Producer, The Tom Kruse Collection

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[Conversation 19: The Impact of COVID-19 on the Future of Australia's Regional Coastlines](#)

Angus Jackson, CEE, International Coastal Management

Paul Burton, Chair in Urban Planning and Management, Griffith University

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