



**WHEATBELT JOBS**

# **POSITION PAPER**

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## What do you see when someone asks you to picture regional Western Australia?

Whatever you think of, you might be surprised to learn that while only 29% of Australia's population lives in rural Australia as recorded by the Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016 Census<sup>1</sup>, non-metropolitan Australia actually contributes 40 percent of Australia's national economic output and non-metropolitan businesses employ one third of the nation's workforce.<sup>2</sup>

Not only do our regions make a disproportionately large contribution to our nation's economic wealth, rural Australia is also a powerful incubator for new businesses.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics report [\*Perspectives on Regional Australia: Business Owners in Regions\*](#)<sup>3</sup> found that while in general only one in seven Australian income earners were business owners, nearly one in five income earners in Australia's regions were business owners. The region with the second highest proportion of business owners in the country was actually Western Australia's Wheatbelt, with 31 per cent of its income earners running a business<sup>3</sup>.

## 31% of income earners run a business in the Wheatbelt

The Wheatbelt's business owners were also part of rural Australia's contribution towards half of the country's growth in the years following the Global Financial Crisis. In fact businesses in the Wheatbelt regularly fulfil an important "smoothing out" role during periods when the state and national economy is challenged, with regional Australia's economy demonstrating greater stability than Australia's metropolitan economy<sup>2</sup>.

Western Australia's regional economy has always played a large part in the health and prosperity of both the state and the national economy, with the state's mining, agricultural and fishing sectors all making significant contributions.

However, Wheatbelt businesses are currently unable to source the staff they need to maintain their business at current operating levels, let alone grow, when there is work beating down their front door. As Matt Woodhouse of Yilgarn Plumbing and Gas puts it, "It's a major issue. It's always been an issue but it's got a lot worse. We cannot get skilled tradesmen. I had an advert up last February for a plumber and I received 50 applications in a four week period, and of those 50 only five percent made the cut. This round I did 10 weeks of advertising and I received only three applications. The only applicant that was a possible out of those said the money was too good in mining."

This crisis includes all of rural, regional and remote Western Australia, not just the remote north of the state. Businesses located in Narrogin, a reasonably large centre less than 2.5 hours from Perth are also at crisis point. Dale Woodruff of Byfields Narrogin explains, "If we advertise for a Junior Accountant for the Narrogin office I'd be surprised if we receive any applicants at all. The major constraint on our business has never been lack of clients, it is 100% lack of staff. We have a team of 10 people in our office and that could easily be 15 or 20."

Regional Development Australia (RDA) Wheatbelt reviewed nine job sites and surveyed a database of regional organisations and businesses in November 2020. They registered a total of 464 vacancies across the Wheatbelt, with this list not including the multitude of positions that are now only advertised on social media sites. The situation has worsened significantly since then.

## A total of 464 vacancies in the Wheatbelt

This is an issue that Bruce Turton of Rural Traffic Services and Maarli Biddi Traffic Services is familiar with. Their head office is in Corrigin, and the business also has branches in Esperance, Kalgoorlie, Northam and Narrogin, "People want to use us because we're a local traffic management company but we just can't get enough staff to satisfy demand.

<sup>1</sup> 2071.0 - [Census of Population and Housing: Reflecting Australia - Stories from the Census](#), 2016 Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018, Canberra.

<sup>2</sup> [Talking Point: The Economic Contribution of Regions to Australia's Prosperity](#), PricewaterhouseCoopers Geospatial Economic Modelling, IMF World Economic Outlook database, Reserve Bank of Australia as published by Regional Australia Institute, Barton ACT 2600.

<sup>3</sup> [Perspectives on Regional Australia: Business Owners in Regions](#) - Perspectives on Regional Australia: Business Owners in Regions, 1380.0.55.008 2011, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra.

Since December 2020 we've missed out on projects totalling \$2.5 million, if not more. There's not a single day that goes by when I'm not turning work down. Prior to Covid-19 we had backpackers and transient people coming over from the east on a 12 month to three year working holiday around Australia. Some would stay a month but some people really liked what we had to offer and they'd stay for six or 12 months. But we're not getting these people anymore. We're now relying on locals and we just don't have enough of them."

The lack of recognition of this problem at State and Federal Government levels is failing to support the growth of our nation, resulting in a lost opportunity to build economic strength and diversity, and represents a huge lost opportunity for taxation revenue. Both State and Federal Governments have failed to introduce positive policy measures that facilitate growth in rural Western Australia, and at the same time persisted with outdated classifications that falsely reduce the problem to only the remotest areas of the state.

This has had a debilitating effect on regional businesses, as Andrew Mead of The Ag Shop explains, "Failure to grow and diversify is our biggest issue. Our business is currently experiencing a growth and transition period. We are aggressively exploring new opportunities for business sustainability. The landscape in the agricultural sector has seen enormous change in recent years. This has forced our business to diversify product and service offerings in order to remain viable. We have been quite successful in this endeavour, however, our vision for the future is being stemmed due to an inability to recruit staff. Not just staff with the necessary level of experience or qualifications, but staff in general who want to be here. We have a number of other avenues that we would like to explore and expand into, but we physically cannot service these areas with our current staffing levels."

## **Our vision for the future is being stemmed due to an inability to recruit staff**

Both State and Federal Governments have progressively either pulled both government offices from regional areas or reduced staffing levels. State Government owned enterprises like Western Power and the WA Water Corporation have pulled depots and offices out of rural WA, moving them to larger regional centres or metropolitan areas. At the same time, the WA State Government has provided no financial incentives to either the mining industry or the community to reverse the fly in / fly out tide which has further pulled both population and resources out of regional and remote communities. Governments have also made it hard for rural businesses to keep skilled overseas immigrants who want to work in rural Australia and have manipulated and drained funding programs like Royalties for Regions that supported regional growth.

However, rural businesses have risen to every challenge. They have innovated, streamlined, diversified and grown. Rural entrepreneurs continuously find new solutions every time a problem presents itself.

## **Rural businesses have risen to every challenge**

Western Australian Wheatbelt businesses have even purchased houses in order to provide subsidised or free housing to staff. They have customised positions to suit staff, offered full or part time positions and flexible hours, supported and funded people from other countries who wish to make Australia home, and even helped staff find employment for their family. Dannelle Foley's business Bencubbin Truck and Auto is a good example, "We literally cannot attract people. The *Wander Out Yonder* campaign that the McGowan Government rolled out to try and get people out here had no impact. We have tried everything to get people out here, we've also just purchased our own house so that we can try and get someone on a drive in drive out or live in basis. I have also partnered with other

businesses in the area to provide opportunities for employee's partners. We recently successfully won a Regional Economic Development (RED) grant to build a larger workshop that we can drive road trains through. We hope that this will provide a better workspace that will help us attract and retain staff. Our plan is to employ another full time mechanic plus an apprentice mechanic, but getting staff here has always been the challenge. We are also applying for a liquor store licence within the shop front and if that goes through then we'll be able to put on a full time administration person, so potentially we could provide employment for a husband and wife team. We're just trying to diversify but also create new employment to keep business rolling."

Ley Webster, who owns a agricultural labour supply business 2WorkinOz in York knows how hard regional businesses are working to find solutions to the current situation, "Farmers are adapting where they can to offer longer term opportunities and provide on farm living arrangements to alleviate the issues surrounding a shortage of housing within rural towns. During seeding this year a lot of farmers simply gave up advertising and just got on with the job of adapting their program to work with the people they had, which added hours to their days and weeks to their seeding season. Overall, from February to May this year we had 160 businesses list over 200 job vacancies with us. However, we were only able to successfully place 47 people. We also were only able to put six people through our training program, all of whom were Australian residents who are still working in the agricultural sector and who look set to continue. This situation is clearly not sustainable and we need immediate action to solve these issues in time for the 2021 grain harvest which is a fast paced and high risk time of year. The agricultural industry can not suffer another season with such a diminished workforce."

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## **to successfully supply 47 people**

As a result of the fallout from Covid-19, now more than ever our nation needs to grow its economy. However, rural businesses need governments that work to support them drive the nation's economy, rather than hinder them.

### **What are the Solutions?**

Wheatbelt businesses across a wide range of industry sectors have provided a range of positive recommendations that would help alleviate labour shortages in regional Western Australia.

Many of these have no cost whatsoever, simply requiring governments to make positive policy changes that support those who live within the 99.78% of Australia that is non-metropolitan Australia<sup>4</sup>

### **>> Government Recognition and Support**

Government recognition and policy support will assist local governments create high quality attractive towns that offer high quality services. Strategic investment should be prioritised to bring resources into regional Western Australia. Dale Woodruff of Byfields Narrogin has seen the impact of a lack of government support for rural WA first hand, "The presence or absence of government support for towns has a snowball effect either upwards or downwards. We've seen the downwards effect when government roles in town have been transferred to either Perth or other regional centres over the last two years. All of these policy decisions add up to what the town looks and feels like for someone new to town. Government support for country towns incentivise people to come to them. We need government support to create better and stronger communities, with better education services, and better employment opportunities."

Matt Woodhouse of Yilgarn Plumbing and Gas in Southern Cross echoes these sentiments, "The Western Australian Government has made the mistake of being Perth-centric. Everything is Perth oriented, everyone is supposed to live in Perth and fly out to jobs. The fly in fly out

mentality in Western Australia has killed a lot of regional towns. The government currently doesn't offer any incentive or benefit to actually have people live in regional towns when they could easily give the mines a tax break for housing half their workforce in the town they are operating from. This would boost those towns again. If Royalties for Regions hadn't been around, how many things wouldn't have been built? And Royalties for Regions is all but wiped out now. The money isn't spent out there, all they spend it on is roads."

"This isn't the case in all regional areas of Australia" says Matt. "It's currently booming in regional Victoria where we also have plumbing teams and there used to be nothing there. Housing is in demand, the area is serviced by a four lane highway connecting to Melbourne, they have a university only an hour's drive away, and there are three large hospitals within 100 kilometres of each other."

## **The Government has made the mistake of being metro-centric**

State and Federal Governments urgently need to recognise that the regions of Western Australia need positive policy initiatives across the board, not just in the remote north or the remote inland.

Andrew Mead of The Ag Shop urges action, "Government classifications of towns and areas impacts programs and funding. Towns that are given remote status are eligible for tax incentives for employees, funding programs for health and education and industry programs. If Bunbury and Mandurah are considered regional, Hyden should be classified as remote as it has all the key features. Hyden cannot be considered equivalent to Bunbury or similar towns/cities classified as regional. Funding ends up being taken by bigger areas with a strong lobby force to secure funding/programs. This is why we needed the Royalties for Regions program."

On the flip side, Bruce Turton of Rural Traffic Services and Maarli Bidli Traffic Services sees that there are other clear ways to help reduce pressure on both regional and metropolitan businesses, "The Government could wind the spending back a little bit, and instead of trying to rush stimulus funding all through within the next three years, they could spread it over five to seven years and we'd all be busier for longer."

### **>> Training & Licensing Policy**

There are a range of positive training and licensing policy changes that the Western Australian State Government could make that would help Wheatbelt businesses.

John Trunfio of Hutton and Northey knows the advantages and limitations of the apprenticeship system well, and can see simple ways to improve the system. His business has been operating for over 40 years and has branches in Merredin, Mukinbudin, Cunderdin and Corrigin. "The State Government should implement a requirement/incentive that all businesses employing trades people must employ apprentices on a ratio relative to the number of qualified staff they employ. This will overcome the current situation where large companies rob trained personnel from small to medium businesses. Some large companies do not employ apprentices. This is not only a problem in the mining industry, it is a problem in other industries as well." In addition, WA Government TAFEs could be moved under one management to 'One TAFE WA.' This would encourage shared resources and reduce costs through economies of scale. There is also a need for a state government commitment to advance and invest in the purpose built Agricultural Technologies Training Facility at Muresk College which is currently under construction. Apprentices coming out of this training facility will have a better focus on our agricultural industry and be equipped with a wider range of skills, improving retention post qualification. Finally, requiring TAFE Lecturers to keep up to date with technology by way of actually working within industry for a required period each year would improve outcomes across a range of industries."

Matt Woodhouse of Yilgarn Plumbing and Gas has also observed inequalities in Western

Australian State Government licensing policy in his industry, "The Western Australian plumber's board has no jurisdiction over plumbers working on mine sites. While you've got to be a licensed plumber to run a plumbing business otherwise, the mines get away with doing whatever they want. Giving the Western Australian Plumber's Board jurisdiction over the mines would stop some of the plumbers moving to mining."

## >> Immigration Policy

While governments regularly comment about how they support the supply of labour to rural Australia through visa and immigration policies, the reality is in fact quite the opposite.

"Hospitality work does not count towards a second year visa in rural WA unless you are north of the Tropic of Capricorn" explains Scott Coppen of the Corrigin Hotel, Corrigin Roadhouse and Windmill Motel. "Backpackers working in hospitality anywhere in rural WA should be able to accrue working days towards a second year working holiday Visa. Currently, if you are located above the Tropic of Capricorn, hospitality work counts towards your second year visa. This is a huge incentive for young backpackers and something that they work toward achieving. However in Corrigin hospitality work does not count towards a second year visa, despite the fact that we struggle so much to get staff." Scott adds, "The sponsorship process must also be streamlined so that small business and sponsored staff can make plans for the future. Not only have various hospitality roles been removed from eligibility for sponsorship, the time frame for sponsorship visas to be approved has lengthened to a point where the sponsored staff are getting disillusioned with the process and also with the uncertainty of their future. We had one very knowledgeable and valuable staff member of three years decide to return home to Scotland (before Covid-19) because she could no longer handle the uncertainty. We have another staff member currently working for us who is also very frustrated as her application has been in for nearly three years and she is desperate to get sponsorship approval so she can plan the next stage of her life living and working in Australia."

Andrew Mead of The Ag Shop agrees, "We have had success with either immigrant labour coming from similar backgrounds or labour originating from other regional areas. Many of these have been female staff who have worked particularly well in the business, with their partners coming into the area for work on the local farms. Visa restrictions that stipulate a limited area to choose from to live and work, or qualifications associated with the granting the visa brings labour to a specific area. In most cases, people will have lived a similar lifestyle and as employment options are readily available these people tend to stay local."

## >> State and Local Government Policy Support to Improve Awareness of the Advantages of Working and Living in Regional Western Australia

Instead of a few glossy images of ecstatically happy 18 year olds having the time of their lives while they wander out yonder, the State Government could get serious about improving awareness of the benefits of life in regional WA.



As Tara Chambers of Bendigo Bank in Mukinbudin puts it, "I love living out here and I would really love to see the state government do more to showcase how wonderful it is to live out in the bush. We don't want for anything out here and living in a small community is awesome." Tara grew up in Perth, and only learnt how good living in regional WA was when she met her partner and ended up moving up to Mukinbudin.

This has always been the case. If you approach someone on the streets of Perth and ask them about where they live, you will find it quite difficult to find someone who will speak

enthusiastically about how beautiful their suburb and their community is.

However, if you ask someone who lives in non-metropolitan Australia about where they live, you will regularly find people who are enthusiastic about the beauty of their home, and who want to tell you about their fantastic and friendly community.

Aside from the above quality of life advantages, the Wheatbelt offers better value for money on housing, and a more affordable standard of living in general. Bruce Turton of Rural Traffic Services and Maarli Bidli Traffic Services comments, "If you take a town like Corrigin where I live, housing is still relatively cheap. You can get something really top class for \$300,000-\$400,000 and do something else with the money you would've otherwise spent on an equivalent house in the city, the cost of living here is a real opportunity."

The Wheatbelt also offers a multitude of career benefits. As Dale Woodruff of Byfields Narrogin outlines, "A good accountant who came to our practice now and who was prepared to commit to the region would enjoy an absolutely stellar career and would reach their professional goals so much quicker than they would in the city."

Tara Chambers of Bendigo Bank in Mukinbudin concurs, "There are some really excellent opportunities out in the bush. Our staff get the benefit of fast tracked career opportunities because they work in a small team. Whereas in larger branches in Perth you're competing against others within a larger team and opportunities are less frequent."

Dannelle Foley of Bencubbin Truck and Auto is of the same opinion, adding, "There's also the safety of our community and what it offers in terms of lifestyle, social activity and freedom for kids. You don't have to get into your car to take your kid somewhere to kick a football. In Perth the yards aren't big enough for that sort of activity. Our social and recreational benefits aren't being articulated well enough to our city friends." We need our state and local governments to be proactive about attracting people to regional Western Australia."

## >>Education Policy

Dale Woodruff of Byfields Narrogin summarises the need for effective education policy perfectly. Dale says, "Education is critically important, you've got absolutely no hope whatsoever of attracting a young family to town if education isn't up to scratch. The State Government needs to incentivise the good teachers to be here and stay here."

## Education is important, it attracts young families to towns



John Trunfio of Hutton and Northey agrees, "When there is only one secondary school in the district it needs cater for all possible subject career paths. We need to see a diverse offering of subjects, encompassing academic and trades streams at our local high schools."

Andrew Mead of The Ag Shop has also seen the direct impact of State Government education policies that have not supported regional education, "There are less and less options available for secondary schooling. A good example is the closure of the Swanleigh Residential College in the Swan Valley. These policies have had a major impact on choices. Public boarding houses are very restricted to what activities they offer due to regulations. Private Boarding school fees are high and put huge pressure on families."

Caroline Robinson, Founder and CEO of the Wheatbelt Business Network would also like to

see high school career development programs and career advisors across Western Australia promote employment and career opportunities in the region. "If career advisors were aware of the career opportunities in the Wheatbelt, rather than just the top courses at University, it would encourage high school students to consider learning in the region and pursuing a career here. You can complete TAFE qualifications in the Wheatbelt or go to university no matter where you are"

## >> Housing Policy

Although housing supply is not an issue in all areas of rural Western Australia, some towns in the Wheatbelt have reached crisis point, with no housing available at all for staff. There is a need to ensure effective federal, state and local government policies that boost the supply of housing in Wheatbelt towns where this is an issue.

### **Some towns have reached crisis point, with no housing available at all for staff**

Tara Chambers of Bendigo Bank Mukinbudin sums the problem up, "There is nowhere for staff to live. There is no accommodation in our town, the situation has just progressively got worse. Our local government is focussed on building up housing stock again, because housing stock has been sold to shire workers but hasn't been replaced. Not everyone who comes into town is financially able to build a house."

Matt Woodhouse of Yilgarn Plumbing and Gas in Southern Cross agrees, "We need two bedroom units or a three bedroom house where you can put a family. The housing here is all pretty substandard, because older existing houses have deteriorated and are now not up to scratch."

The housing supply issue has been worsened by ineffective State Government policy. Dannelle Foley of Bencubbin Truck and Auto explains, "All the priorities for housing in the Wheatbelt in the last five to eight years has been about age friendly communities and independent housing.

State and local governments need to be proactive about developing and maintaining new housing stock. The State Government could also be more proactive in other policy areas. For example, if you move and want to purchase land and build a house then you could receive an extra \$10,000 for certain postcodes. Local governments are also hampered by red tape when they shouldn't be. For example, there are four vacant blocks on the street we live on, which typically sell for \$5,000. But our local governments are held back by so many restrictions which make it difficult to advertise property that they actually own."

Caroline Robinson of the WBN says "State government housing in many Wheatbelt towns is also in need of renewal and upgrades."

### **Many local governments are housing State Government employees because they have not renewed or built new houses in Wheatbelt towns. This puts pressure on local government housing when it could be used by the local government or businesses in town**

Housing availability in the Wheatbelt has also been impacted negatively by policy inaction on other fronts. Andrew Mead of The Ag Shop has observed this directly in his area of the Wheatbelt, "The State Government's Country Housing Authority has not updated the eligibility for Keystart home loans that help people get into the housing market since 2015. If a town is given remote status this helps applicants meet eligibility requirements for a housing loan which is very important for town growth and development. Another issue is minimal sales history in rural areas leading to difficulty demonstrating land valuation. This can cause issues with successful lending from banks in order to purchase a residential property."

## >> Payroll Tax

Despite the WA Government recently lifting the payroll tax threshold to \$1m, Wheatbelt businesses still face a much higher payroll tax burden than in other states. "This is a significant hindrance on employing more people" said Caroline Robinson of the WBN.

**It is such an unnecessary tax. We should be encouraging businesses to employ more people. Instead we are penalising them for employing people**

## >> Lending Policy

The lending policies of banks is also an obstacle when new residents want to relocate to live in a Wheatbelt town. In most cases lenders want larger deposits for home loans in the country which impacts upon the decision making process.

## >> Support Australians to Take up Regional Career Opportunities

There are a number of possible initiatives that could incentivise people to work in the Wheatbelt. As Dale Woodruff of Byfields Narrogin has observed, "Currently jobseekers will sit out of the job market and wait for a job in Perth rather than come out and work in non-metropolitan Australia. Our political and social security system facilitates this situation."

Andrew Mead of The Ag Shop agrees, but offers a caution, "There is a need to ensure job applicants are only applying for suitable roles as opposed to any role in order to receive financial benefits. A simple change in Federal Government legislation would achieve this easily and would save the wasting of considerable effort, resources and finances by employers during recruitment processes"

He adds, "Implementing a scheme whereby tertiary students have their student loans

heavily reduced if they work out in regional areas for a minimum two year period is a possible option."

Dannelle Foley of Bencubbin Truck and Auto agrees, "You can see that incentives do have an impact with the State Government matching the Federal Government's Housing Stimulus and the consequent explosion in building activity. So there are opportunities to provide incentives for people to relocate, or possibly rental subsidies"

Caroline Robinson of the WBN adds "Ultimately a lot of the issues can be changed with policy and do not require stimulus funding or incentives"

"Joint planning and a recognition of the issues by all levels of Government would also help. It is vitally important Government have a long term commitment to seeing our regions and in particular the Wheatbelt grow"

## About the Wheatbelt Business Network

The Wheatbelt Business Network commissioned this work on behalf of its members in April and May 2021. The businesses featured in this article are members. The Wheatbelt Business Network is a proactive member business association. Its purpose is to support its members through information, events, networking, business programs and advocacy.

In 2020 the WBN established [WheatbeltJobs.com.au](http://WheatbeltJobs.com.au) to help members and non members advertise job vacancies in the region and to attract people to the region. It was funded by WBN members.

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