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Cover image: Campers at Mt Oxley, Courtesy of Back O' Bourke Exhibition Centre, Photographer - Simon Bayliss

Left: Cobb Highway Touring Route, courtesy of The Long Paddock
The NSW Government is committed to planning for the future housing, jobs, infrastructure and environmental needs of its regions. To deliver this commitment, the NSW Department of Planning and Environment released a draft Far West Regional Plan in late 2016 for public comment.

Stakeholders and the community were invited to provide submissions on the draft Plan between 13 December 2016 and 13 March 2017. During this period, the Department received 26 submissions from a wide range of stakeholders.

This report summarises the engagement program undertaken for the draft Plan and the feedback received. It also details the range of submissions received in response to the draft Plan, the themes raised through submissions and the NSW Government’s response and actions related to these issues. These responses have guided the development of the final Far West Regional Plan.

The NSW Government has set three goals for the Far West region:

1. A diverse economy with efficient transport and infrastructure networks
2. Exceptional semi-arid rangelands traversed by the Barwon-Darling River
Engagement program

Methodology
To raise awareness of the draft Far West Regional Plan and to encourage feedback to help inform the preparation of the final Plan, the Department undertook a wide-reaching engagement program, which ran from 13 December 2016 to 13 March 2017.

To ensure the final Plan responded to a range of needs, a thorough stakeholder analysis was undertaken and a range of stakeholders were consulted, including:

- residents, community and interest groups;
- business and industry peak bodies;
- local Aboriginal Land Councils, and
- local government.

Tools and results
The engagement program involved a number of tools to reach these stakeholders and gather their feedback.

Events and briefing sessions
Briefings to engage groups and people who represented a range of interests were held early in the consultation period. The Department also held a number of follow-up meetings and briefings that focused on specific issues raised by participants. In total, 15 briefings were held with 107 attendees.

Meetings with key stakeholders have continued after the consultation period in order to discuss and clarify issues raised in the submissions.

Local government
Following the launch of the draft Plan, the Department approached councils in the region to request their support in promoting the draft Plan to the community via their newsletters, websites and other channels.

Far West Councils:
Balranald
Bourke
Brewarrina
Broken Hill
Central Darling
Cobar
Unincorporated Area
Walgett
Wentworth
Email direct marketing

An email titled ‘Help shape the future of the Far West community’ was sent out 13 December 2016 to over 5,000 subscribers on the Department’s eNews to launch the engagement program for the draft Plan and encourage subscribers to visit the Department’s website and lodge a submission.

Survey

The Department created a survey comprising 20 questions that asked respondents about their priorities, values, views and goals for regional planning.

The survey, available online via the Department’s website, received 40 survey responses.

The results of the survey showed:

- the three most important factors to Far West residents are health services, the local environment and proximity to required services;
- residents were most satisfied with local housing affordability, management of agricultural land and management of local schools; and
- positivity about the draft Plan goals, particularly Goal 2 relating to the environment.

The five most important factors to the Far West region respondents were:

1. **Health Services**
2. **The Local Environment**
3. **Proximity to Services You Require**
4. **Jobs in Your Area**
5. **Resource Management**
Digital (including online activity, social media and website)

The Department undertook a comprehensive campaign of digital advertising during the engagement program. This campaign helped drive engagement over a number of channels including the Department’s website, Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn. The total paid digital advertising campaign resulted in almost 300,000 impressions and 3,312 engagements, with Facebook ads performing strongest, with 3,246 total engagements including 1,629 clicks and 1,292 reactions.

Digital advertising helped to raise awareness of the consultation on the draft Plan and encouraged people to visit the Department’s website to provide feedback. The website featured the draft Plan and a summary of the Plan’s highlights. During the campaign our website received 6,321 unique visits to view content relating to the draft Plan.

People also provided feedback by commenting on Facebook.

The three most popular themes discussed as a result of the Facebook campaign were:

1. The economy, with a focus on agribusiness diversification opportunities
2. Delivering enabling infrastructure such as water and telecommunications
3. Protecting the environment, with a focus on the Darling River and other waterways.

Media

The Department distributed a media release on 13 December 2016 to announce the regional planning process. In total, the media releases generated 24 media stories.

| MEDIA STATISTICS |
|------------------|--------|
| Activity         | Total  |
| Newspaper/online articles | 14     |
| Radio            | 10     |
| Total            | 24     |

Letter to residents

The Department reached out to residents in the Far West by sending a letter to every household (over 16,000 households). This letter provided an overview of the draft Plan, outlined the consultation program and encouraged residents to provide feedback. This process was managed externally by Australia Post.
Methodology

As a result of the engagement program outlined above, the Department received 26 submissions either in hard copy via post or electronically.

Each submission was comprehensively reviewed and relevant comments were identified and catalogued to prepare a comprehensive data set by theme. These 14 themes were:

1. Population Growth and Change
2. Housing
3. Centres and Settlements
4. Transport and Infrastructure
5. Land Use Conflict
6. Agriculture
7. Resources and Energy
8. Environment
9. Health Services
10. Education Services
11. Economy
12. Implementation and Monitoring
13. Local place based
14. Other matters

For some categories, for example ‘Transport and Infrastructure’ – a large volume of feedback was received. In these cases, sub-themes (for example - freight and logistics, public transport, proposed infrastructure and local roads) have been used to sort, analyse and present information.

Summary of submissions

Type of submitters

A wide range of stakeholders sent submissions including:

- private individuals
- business and industry
- local government

Location of submitters

The Far West Regional Plan covers the 8 Local Government Areas (LGAs) including: Balranald, Bourke, Brewarrina, Broken Hill, Central Darling, Cobar, Walgett and Wentworth as well as the Unincorporated Area.
Broad Issues

• Stakeholders expressed positive feedback about the draft Plan goals, and suggested some additional directions and actions.

• Stakeholders expressed the need for a clear governance, delivery and monitoring mechanism – there was confusion between the draft Plan and the Far West Initiative.

• Stakeholders requested the plan better articulate the importance of water infrastructure upgrades to support both urban and industry use, alongside balancing water resources for the environment, particularly focussed on the environmental condition of the Darling River.

• Stakeholders would like to see more accurate reflection of regional connectivity, particularly the role of Dubbo as the main service centre for the Bourke, Brewarrina, Cobar and Walgett local government areas, and recognising the opportunities from connectivity with Victoria and South Australia.

• Stakeholders indicated the need to identify transport and infrastructure upgrade projects, such as sealing the Cobb Highway, Nyngan to Cobar water pipeline, alternate freight routes such as the Wool Track and improving access to telecommunications, rail and air services.
Submissions: Analysis and response

Centres and settlements

Themes that emerged were:

• Submissions requested that strong regional connectivity to the Orana region be detailed further. There is a common understanding that the Plan focuses on the role of Broken Hill as a strategic centre when several local government areas rely and relate to the Dubbo in the Orana region, as a key service centre.

• Lightning Ridge has been left out of the Plan. Submissions requested that the economic role of Lightning Ridge be recognised in the Plan.

Response

In response, the Department has:

• Revised mapping to show more key settlements and their connectivity to other settlements within and outside in the region.

• Revised local area narratives to identify the smaller towns and villages in each local government area.

• Emphasised that whilst Broken Hill is a key centre for its part of the region, that other centres relate to key communities of interest elsewhere, such as the Dubbo in the Orana region.
Transport and Infrastructure

Themes that emerged were:

- Submissions raised the importance of the freight network to the regional economy, and suggested strategies that would strengthen the Plan and ensure coordinated investment in the freight network, with focus on the Cobb Highway and Wool Track.
- The full range of infrastructure should be included in the Plan (airports, hospitals, health services, schools and education, water storage dams, etc) to inform public and private investment.
- Poor telecommunication networks across the regions are significantly impacting economic productivity. Submissions requested that resolving telecommunication issues be an action in the plan.
- Submissions raised the importance of ongoing access to realistic transport options, including air and rail transport and associated affordability, to support residents and the tourism industry.
- Water infrastructure is an ongoing issue in the region. A whole of Government approach is needed in order to ensure water resources for industry, the environment and community is balanced in the region.
- Support for transport corridors to be identified and protected in Council LEPs.
- Support for the protection of regional airports from encroachment of unsuitable development and importance of continued access to Sydney Kingsford-Smith Airport.

Response

In response, the Department has:

- Outlined the major freight corridors between the region and Adelaide, Melbourne, Newcastle, Sydney, Brisbane, Perth and Darwin, which are essential to the success of the region’s agribusiness, mining, manufacturing, and freight and logistics sectors.
- Identified the strategic need for future infrastructure investment along with actions to better coordinate the delivery of new infrastructure.
- Included actions to work with stakeholders to identify the regional freight network and prioritise and coordinate the delivery of projects to address impediments in the regional freight network.
- Support the continued allocation of regional flights into Sydney Airport and the protection of airports in the region through land use planning.
- Identified key water security projects that are necessary to support economic opportunities in the region.
Agriculture

Themes that emerged were:

• Support for the directions and actions within the Plan that promote the protection of agricultural lands and the focus of growing agribusiness.
• Submissions highlighted opportunities for economic diversification in agribusiness, particularly in the goat and kangaroo industry, while managing fragile landscapes.

Response

In response, the Department has:

• Retained actions in the Plan to protect important agricultural land, and to support agribusiness diversification by removing planning barriers in local environmental plans.
• Included a new action to develop and implement land management arrangements to ensure continuity of supply for the emerging goat industry.
• Included a new action to promote the sustainable management of kangaroo populations by investigating potential economic opportunities.

Resources and Energy

Themes that emerged were:

• Support for the sections on mining in the draft Plan addressing potential impacts of mining on the environment, agriculture and communities.
• Support for the proposed action to develop scenario planning tool to help communities plan for impacts on service delivery in mining communities.
• Strong support for actions which support renewable energy and associated industries.
• Need to continue to improve the opal mining regulatory and enforcement system in the Lightning Ridge Opal Prospecting Areas to ensure better management and rehabilitation of opal prospecting sites.

Response

In response, the Department has:

• Retained a direction to sustainably manage mineral resources, including an action to protect areas of mineral and energy resources potential and support mineral and energy resource industries with required infrastructure.
• Retained an action to support communities that are transitioning out of mining operations to manage change in population and demand for service delivery and explore new economic opportunities.
• Retained the direction to capitalise on renewable energy opportunities, including identifying areas with renewable energy potential which have ready access to connect to electricity networks.
• Included new actions to progressively improve the mineral claims process for the opal mining industry around Lightning Ridge.
Environment
Themes that emerged were:

- Requests for more recognition of the contribution of tourism and recreation and how the protection of the natural environment will support tourism and recreation opportunities.
- Support the recognition and protection of Travelling Stock Routes as biodiversity assets for the region.
- Suggested more protection of heritage, particularly Aboriginal cultural heritage, within the region.
- Requests that the plan better reflect the importance of sustainably managing water resources, principally the Darling River.

Response
In response, the Department has:

- Retained a direction in the final Plan to increase resilience to natural hazards and climate change, including using the most up-to-date information to inform land use planning.
- Retained a direction to support tourism opportunities in the region, and additional discussion on recreational opportunities.
- Included a direction in the final Plan to protect the region’s environmental assets, including actions to minimise potential impacts to areas of high environmental value.
- Retained a direction and actions to work with the Local Aboriginal Land Councils to conduct a strategic assessment of their landholdings. This will identify priority sites with economic development potential that can create a ‘pipeline’ of potential projects that the Local Aboriginal Land Councils may wish to consider.
- Included a direction to respect and protect aboriginal heritage, including actions to undertake and implement heritage studies to inform local land use strategies.
- Emphasised the importance of the Barwon–Darling river system and the need to actively manage all waterways in the region, to sustain and enable communities to prosper.

Health Services
Themes that emerged were:

- Availability and accessibility of services in the region – particularly obstetric services.

Response
In response, the Department has:

- Included a direction on improving access to local health, aged care and seniors housing, including improving access to health facilities for cross-border communities through improved transport connections.

Economy
Themes that emerged were:

- Government investment in the region doesn’t match the economic output of the region.
- Requests for more recognition in the final Plan of tourism and recreation in the region and how the protection of environmental assets will support tourism and recreation into the future.
- Requests for a broader focus on economic diversification and economic opportunities the region.

Response
In response, the Department has:

- Better recognised the diverse economic opportunities across the region, including in mining, renewable energy, education and training, agribusiness, and value-added manufacturing, and included actions in the final Plan to support the region’s diverse industries.
• Retained directions and actions on supporting agribusiness and value-adding manufacturing.

• Retained direction to promote tourism opportunities in the region, with new actions supporting specific tourism developments such as the Line of Lode in Broken Hill, and tourism trails.

• Inclusion of new actions specifically focused on Aboriginal tourism and the opportunities to expand Aboriginal Export Ready Tour Products.

• Inclusion of a new action to consult with native title holders, particularly prescribed body corporates (PBCs), to determine how land subject to native title rights may be utilised in the tourism sector.

Implementation and Monitoring

Themes that emerged were:

• Governance was a prominent issue across the region, with stakeholders expressing concern about the unknown outcomes of the Far West Initiative and potential impact on the delivery of the Plan.

• Suggestions for the actions in the Plan to be more measurable with timeframes and deliverables and that the committee is accountable for implementation.

• Suggestions for the final Plan to be a wider whole of government approach and not simply focused on land use.

• Calls for more meaningful community engagement to inform the final Plan.

Response

In response, the Department has:

• Incorporated an updated section titled ‘Delivering the Plan’ to explain implementation mechanisms and governance structures.

• Prepared a stand-alone Implementation Plan which includes responsibility and timing for actions.

• Noted suggestions for representation on the implementation committee, recognizing that further engagement with additional stakeholders will be undertaken throughout implementation of the Plan and delivery of individual actions.

Other matters

• A number of submissions related to topics outside the scope of the Plan.

Response

In response, the Department has:

• Where issues not related specifically to the Plan were raised, these matters have been referred to relevant agencies within the NSW Government.
For more information about the Far West Regional Plan 2036 visit planning.nsw.gov.au