



**Mick Keogh**

Executive Director  
Australian Farm Institute

Infrastructure is often taken for granted and certainly doesn't usually feature as part of impassioned policy debates – until it fails. Whether it's a railway, bridge, road, airport, telecommunication system or energy transmission utility, as long as it is working then it goes largely unnoticed. However, a major failure of just one of these invariably generates a storm of media scrutiny and blame shifting, and serves as a reminder of the critical role of infrastructure in our daily lives.

For people living in rural and regional areas of Australia, infrastructure is perhaps even more important than is the case for people in coastal or urban regions. Access to education, healthcare, services, entertainment and even basic human social interaction is often heavily dependent on fragile telecommunications systems, a thin strip of bitumen, and an airport or bus terminal. Even a brief failure of any of these can be life-threatening.

For businesses located in regional and rural areas, the availability and quality of infrastructure is often a critical element in achieving and maintaining competitiveness, and ensuring that costs are minimised. Infrastructure quality and availability also serves as a major factor in attracting and retaining staff in regional areas.

Infrastructure by its very nature is often not suited to private-sector investment, hence governments play a critical role in its provision, and therein lies a major challenge for regional Australia. If it comes down to a decision between investing scarce taxpayers' dollars on a new urban ring road servicing millions of commuters daily, or upgrading flood-prone bridges on a regional highway, simple political arithmetic dictates that

the urban infrastructure will always win. The challenge for regional and rural Australia lies in ensuring that regional infrastructure needs are clearly articulated, and that they remain prominent in the minds of decision-makers, when it comes down to dividing up the scarce dollars.

Mark Harvey-Sutton is a policy officer with the National Farmers' Federation (NFF), which has a key role in advising governments on the infrastructure needs of the agriculture sector. In his article, Mark notes that farming takes place in every corner of this vast continent – often far removed from arterial roads and freight routes. This leaves the sector perilously beholden to freight costs, as produce is moved over the 'last mile' to link in with major supply chains.

The article notes the release of the *Australian Infrastructure Plan* by Infrastructure Australia (2016) was a pivotal moment as it set out a clear vision for Australia's overall infrastructure investment. It recommended the development of a National Freight and Supply Chain Strategy.

Creation of that strategy is now underway, and it presents very real opportunities to piece the links of the national freight system together, set a pipeline for future investment, and maximise the existing logistics network.

There are countless projects that could streamline freight movements and unlock bottlenecks. However, the NFF believes that for a National Freight and Supply Chain Strategy to be meaningful, it must do more than focus on individual projects. It must put an end to the politicisation of infrastructure funding.

Mark argues that for too long our key nation building projects have been identified and committed to as part of political cycles beholden to elections and budgets. The magnitude of infrastructure expenditure and the legacy of projects warrants consideration that transcends political cycles. The NFF believes solutions reside in the systems and architecture that governs infrastructure investment and coordination.

The second article is by Luke Bowen, General Manager, Northern Australia Development & Trade, with the Northern Territory Government. Luke notes that accelerating the development of Northern Australia has become a policy priority for the three northern jurisdictions and for the

Australian Government. This is in large part due to the expected growth in demand from Asia. By 2050 the Indo-Pacific region is expected to generate almost half the world's economic output. An increasingly affluent Asian population will see the demand for quality produce steadily increase.

In terms of being positioned to benefit from this increased demand, the article argues that a major constraint on the Northern Australian agricultural sector is the lack of economic infrastructure – particularly transport and water related infrastructure. It is therefore critical that there is significant government and private-sector investment in such infrastructure. Given the lead time for new infrastructure to become economically productive, Luke argues there is now a degree of urgency or Australia risks being left behind as other countries take advantage of Asia's economic rise.

The third article is by Julie Freeman of Deakin University and Sora Park of the University of Canberra, and it focuses on the role of telecommunications infrastructure for regional development. They argue that rural Australians are constrained by challenges of telecommunications coverage, reliability, speed, costs and data allowances. As reliance on technologies increases – particularly in industries like agriculture – improvements to the quality of connectivity are needed to advance current practices and enable increased productivity and competitiveness in the digital economy. If the limitations of rural broadband are not addressed, considerable differences in internet use will continue to emerge between urban and rural Australia.

To narrow the digital divide, the authors propose that infrastructure developments must be prioritised in the most under-served regions. While the internet is increasingly a prerequisite for everyday tasks, the apparent lack of urgency in extending high-speed and reliable broadband to rural Australia is amplifying existing rural-urban inequities. Greater flexibility in Australian policy would support investment and innovation in locale-specific solutions that account for varying user demands and market environments.

They conclude that, while the deployment costs of quality broadband are high, the potential losses if nothing is done to improve connectivity in rural Australia will be higher.

The critical importance of telecommunications infrastructure for the agriculture sector is the subject of the final article, contributed by David Lamb from the Precision Agriculture Research Group of the University of New England.

The paper states that farmer frustrations around existing network telecommunications in Australia are fed by a perception that their challenges are not being acknowledged, nor responded to, by network operators or at the industry or national strategic level. The paper considers some of the recent top-down initiatives concerning telecommunications as it relates to Australian farmers. In particular, it focuses on the Universal Services Obligation, Mobile Domestic Roaming and opportunities around access and data speeds as they relate to agriculture, and examines whether top-down initiatives will in fact meet the bottom-up needs and expectations of farmers.

David argues that mobile networks in rural and regional Australia have evolved to primarily service the needs of travelling urban clients. Were additional mobile network infrastructure to be established on the basis of servicing the needs of farmers, the economic benefits of domestic mobile roaming to network operators may be entirely different.

The paper notes that there is no quantitative data available on the diurnal and seasonal demands for data (quantity and desired/required speeds of access) for farmers, specifically as it relates to the business of farming. David notes that broadband performance monitoring needs to be extended to include those modes of access to Australian farms, specifically with the aim of understanding broadband access experience related to the business and lifestyle of farmers.

A conclusion from all these papers is that regional and rural infrastructure investment priorities remains a challenge for all non-urban Australians, and this is an issue on which rural and regional Australians will need to develop a stronger focus, if the current disparities between rural and urban Australia are to be overcome.

