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Getting regional infrastructure right

The data drought is the most recent example of lack of critical infrastructure in regional areas compared with urban Australia. However, internet connectivity is only the latest in a long list of infrastructure issues where regional Australia is at a massive disadvantage. Road and rail, health and schools all lag behind.

Is this just a reality of the geography and population distribution of Australia? or are there solutions to bring regional infrastructure in line with the city areas? The Spring 2017 edition of the Farm Policy Journal seeks to answer these questions.

'Infrastructure is often taken for granted and certainly doesn't usually feature as part of impassioned policy debates – until it fails,' said Mick Keogh, Executive Director of the Australian Farm Institute.

'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.'

Articles included in the Spring 2017 Journal:

- **'Getting Freight Right for Agriculture – A Key Piece to Becoming a \$100 Billion Industry'**, by Mark Harvey-Sutton, Manager Rural Affairs, National Farmers' Federation (NFF)
- **'Infrastructure Constraints on Agricultural Productivity Growth – A Northern Territory Perspective'**, by Luke Bowen, General Manager, Northern Australia Development & Trade, DefenceNT, Department of Trade, Business and Innovation, Northern Territory Government of Australia
- **'Broadband Connectivity for Rural Community and Agricultural Development'**, by Julie Freeman, Deakin University, and Sora Park, University of Canberra
- **'Telecommunications and Australian Agriculture: Will Top-Down Meet Bottom-Up?'**, by David Lamb, Precision Agriculture Research Group, University of New England

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