



2002 – 2003 Annual Report

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**“ Catalyst – a person or thing
that causes an important change to take place”**

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ACTING CHAIRPERSON'S MESSAGE

This is the third (and final) year of the term of the current Regional Development Board, which first met in February 2000. The Board has evolved into a harmonious, constructive and innovative team committed to the advancement of the economic development interests of the Mid North Coast region. The sustained involvement and participation of Board members (in a voluntary capacity) over this period has been admirable, and I thank the outgoing Board members for their contribution to this region. I would particularly like to commend the courage and dedication of Mrs Sue Dethridge, who sadly passed away after a long illness on 12 June 2003.

The Board has become increasingly aware that regional development priorities need to be based on a sound understanding of the dynamics and drivers of the regional economy, and the Board is moving to address the need for credible economic research on these issues. The Board is also committed to the formulation of a regional strategy that will provide a blueprint for integrated economic development in the future, in partnership with both industry and other economic development stakeholders.

There are a number of forces impacting on the economy of this diverse region. One of the most significant factors has been strong population growth in the coastal urban centres, reflecting the region's appeal to retirees, families and businesses wishing to relocate. The region has the second lowest proportion nationally of people in the 15-34 age range, and the highest proportion nationally of people in the over 55 age range.

However, strong population growth has the potential to mask significant structural imbalances in the region's economy, with a relatively high welfare dependency/employment ratio; a relatively high proportion of low paid/low skilled/casual service jobs; a relatively narrow economic base; and high under-employment. The National Economics "2002 State of the Regions" report ranked the Mid North Coast as 61/64 on "per capita flow of funds" and "very poor households", with an "effective" unemployment rate of over 15%.

It is in this context that the Board has defined its primary goal as facilitating growth in private sector employment. The Board has particularly focussed on strategies to support the growth and profitability of existing enterprises, as well as diversification in those (mainly rural) areas impacted adversely by economic restructuring (most recently the deregulation of the dairy industry). These strategies are being progressed in partnership with both industry and other economic development stakeholders.

The Board's work over the last three years has provided a sound foundation to further advance the region's interests. The establishment of an economic research capability and development of a regional strategy should strengthen the essential structures and processes that will underpin effective and sustainable regional economic development into the future.

Ron McDermott

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT BOARD – ROLE

The Mid North Coast Regional Development Board is an independent not-for-profit organisation funded by the NSW Department of State and Regional Development (DSRD), one of thirteen throughout NSW. The Board is comprised of ten business and community leaders from across the NSW Mid North Coast, appointed by the NSW Cabinet for a three year term. Profiles on Board members appear at the end of this report.

Regional Development Boards are tasked to advance the economic development interests of their regions. DSRD describes the Boards' role broadly as "providing a strategic framework for sustainable economic growth". The Board is one of the layers in the economic development hierarchy in the region, positioned in the middle between Local and Federal Governments. The Board works in partnership with a diverse range of stakeholders and industries to progress regional development initiatives.

The Board's specific objectives are to:

- Promote regional economic development initiatives in the region through community cooperation, competitive marketing of the region, and hosting Commonwealth and State initiatives;
- Advise the NSW Government and DSRD on important regional economic development issues;
- Involve key stakeholders, including local councils, in regional economic development;
- Advance the development of local leadership;
- Support major investment projects; and
- Promote key initiatives to improve the region's attraction to business investment, including infrastructure development.

The Mid North Coast Regional Development Board's responsibilities cover the Local Government Areas of Greater Taree, Hastings, Kempsey, Nambucca, Bellingen and Coffs Harbour. The region is extended to include the Great Lakes and Gloucester LGAs in joint initiatives with the Board's Federal counterpart, the Area Consultative Committee.

The Board has defined its mission as "enhancing our region by supporting sustainable enterprise". The Board's activities are primarily directed towards increasing private sector employment by identifying and progressing opportunities to enhance the business and investment environment and support private enterprise.

The Board also manages a number of specific industry development projects and programs (using funding from relevant State and Federal Government programs where appropriate). The Board does not directly assist individual businesses, but industries and areas.

BOARD PRINCIPLES

The Board's primary goal is to increase private sector employment through effective action to enhance business and investment opportunities in the Mid North Coast region. In undertaking its work the Board has adopted a set of principles that guide the conduct of its regional economic development activities. These principles include that the Board and its staff will:

- Operate in an ethical, respectful, transparent, accountable, socially responsible and non-partisan manner
- Determine its priorities in consultation with Local Governments, communities, industries and other economic development stakeholders
- Use partnerships where appropriate
- Undertake initiatives that will be of significant economic benefit and have strategic and environmentally sustainable outcomes, and
- Progress economic development initiatives that are realistic and outcomes focussed.

On taking up their duties all Board members and staff are required to endorse a Code of Conduct and Ethics. In participating in Board activities Members are expected to put aside personal, local and business interests, and consider only the broader interests of the region and the community. The Board has adopted protocols for managing potential conflicts of interests that are applied scrupulously.

Regional development is always a team activity, requiring constructive partnerships with both the public and private sectors. As a relatively small volunteer-based organisation with two full-time employees, the capacity of the Board to play an effective role in facilitating regional economic development is largely dependent on its ability to influence and gain the support of others. The Board aims to act as a catalyst to initiate sustainable economic growth.

The Board is fundamentally committed to responding to real industry and community needs with effective and practical strategies, not arbitrarily "picking winners" or trying to impose "top down" solutions. In determining its regional development priorities (and in the context of the continuing absence of a widely-accepted regional strategy) the Board has made considerable efforts to consult widely with public and private sector stakeholders, and has particularly valued the input and support of constituent LGAs.

The longer-term viability of industry development initiatives is dependent on the formation of resilient and inclusive networks willing to take responsibility for determining the future of their sectors. The Board seeks to engage with industry at an early stage, to encourage the formation of enterprise networks, and to support the formulation of development plans where there is a high level of industry ownership and commitment to implementation.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT PRIORITIES

In consultation with a range of stakeholders the Board has adopted a set of regional development priorities for the Mid North Coast. These are:

PRIVATE FORESTRY - support and facilitate the development of a commercial private forestry industry and associated value chain in partnership with key stakeholders, growers and the timber industry.

AQUACULTURE - support and facilitate private investment in aquaculture ventures, in partnership with NSW Fisheries and the aquaculture industry.

AGRICULTURAL DIVERSIFICATION - support and facilitate agricultural diversification, in partnership with NSW Agriculture, the DSRD's Agribusiness Development Manager, LGAs and industry.

VALUE ADDING - support and facilitate all forms of value adding - food processing, commercial organic food production, timber processing.

REGIONAL & COLLABORATIVE MARKETING - support, facilitate and undertake the consistent and effective external promotion of the region, with the aim of assisting existing businesses to access new markets, and to promote new business and investment opportunities in the region.

TOURISM - support development of the tourism industry (improve access to markets, new products, regional infrastructure) in partnership with Tourism NSW, the Regional Tourism Organisation and other industry stakeholders.

INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT - support and facilitate infrastructure development – ICT, water, transport, roads, health, aged care, energy, education.

MANUFACTURING - undertake projects to support the growth and increase the profitability and employment of existing and new manufacturing industries; facilitate the establishment of industry networks.

CREATIVITY & INNOVATION - support the creative industries; promote benchmarking and best practice; support the commercialisation of new products.

BUSINESS CULTURE - support the formation of enterprise networks; identify and progress opportunities to aggregate and share expertise and promote the adoption of a “learning communities” approach.

RESEARCH & STRATEGIC PLANNING – commission research on the main trends in the regional economy as the foundation for informed decisions on regional development priorities, and as the basis for future integrated regional economic development planning.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES

The Board has identified a series of key strategies as practical and realistic ways of advancing economic development priorities. These include:

- **Establishing industry networks** - supporting the formation of mutual interest industry networks (typically as not-for-profit incorporated associations or cooperatives). Industry networks are particularly important in a regional economy dominated by small businesses, where individual businesses lack the resources and “critical mass” to gain adequate access to consumers and markets

Industry network benefits can include initiating cost-effective collaborative marketing; sharing information and expertise, and raising skill levels and awareness of new technologies; realising clustering opportunities; implementing industry development plans; undertaking collective bargaining; leveraging additional resources; and lobbying and gaining Government recognition of the value of the industry sector

- **Sponsoring the formulation of industry development plans** – a natural progression from the establishment of industry networks is the formation and implementation of industry development plans. Such plans can identify opportunities for industry growth and provide a framework for ongoing cooperation and coordination and the achievement of mutually beneficial objectives (eg building shared facilities/infrastructure, value adding, meeting minimum volume requirements, penetrating new markets etc)
- **Providing credible information to reduce investor uncertainty** – it is clear that one of the major obstacles to private investment in many industries and areas is uncertainty. The Board is strongly committed to the publication and dissemination of credible information that assists potential investors to evaluate potential risks and returns. This is also the rationale for the Board’s strong support for research on trends in the region’s economy as the foundation for a regional strategy
- **Convening and supporting regional stakeholder networks** – to facilitate information sharing, improve coordination and build support for regional initiatives, the Board and its Federal counterpart, the Area Consultative Committee, have established a regional development network that meets quarterly to progress regional initiatives
- **Progressing specific industry development projects** – as outlined in the following section, the Board undertakes a number of projects and programs to support specific industry sectors
- **Advocacy** – the Board has a responsibility to advise Government on a range of issues that may be inimicable to the region’s economic development interests

BOARD ACTIVITIES & PROJECTS 2002-2003

FORESTRY INVESTMENT PROGRAM

The Board successfully secured Federal and State Government funding from Agriculture Fisheries Forestry Australia and the NSW Department of State and Regional Development for the operation of the Forestry Investment Program (FIP) for a two-year period over the 2002 and 2003 calendar years. The FIP is part of a nationwide Regional Plantation Committee (RPC) network that draws together regional industry, government and community expertise in the development of regionally specific industry development activities. An Executive Officer supports the operation of the RPC and administers the FIP.

The FIP is clearly positioned in a regional and economic development context. It aims to support and facilitate commercially focussed private forestry through private plantation investment and the development of associated industry value chains. This approach is designed to integrate and enhance the multiple benefits that the industry brings to the region.

Private forestry (or farm forestry) is a newly emerging component of a traditional forest industry. Major changes to the management and production capacity of the public native forest estate are creating opportunities for private forestry and the plantation sector in general. Governments and industry are increasingly looking towards private plantation investment to meet projected timber supply gaps, and at the same time enhance delivery of a range of environmental land use and production objectives.

The marriage of these commercial and environmental outcomes are particularly complementary, and indicates the great potential of this industry to demonstrate and deliver practical ways to achieve triple-bottom-line sustainability. Farm forestry can be integrated into the agricultural landscape, providing for the productive management of both plantations and native forest in a way that can be profitable and provide ecosystem services.

In response to this region's specific needs, the FIP concentrates on developing the industry's investment pathway. This means imbedding the potential of private forestry in local natural resource and economic development policy structures; encouraging markets and market connections; profitable & transparent economics; and a supportive legislative environment.

Practical manifestations of this role throughout 2002/03 have been:

- Providing information to assist plantation, native forest and manufacturing investment decisions, including providing specific training and showcasing the region's attributes as an ideal private forestry investment location;
- Supporting and leveraging research and investment into regional market development opportunities;

- Assisting access to technical expertise for timber processing eco-efficiency moves;
- Linking growers to existing and emerging market opportunities;
- Encouraging media coverage and communicating the industry's multiple benefits; and
- Building links with growers and community groups to enhance the uptake of private forestry.

The Program increasingly recognises the value of industry network approaches and is moving to support their formation.

AGRICULTURAL DIVERSIFICATION

Commencing in late 2000 (and in partnership with the Area Consultative Committee) the Board undertook a program directed towards the needs of rural communities adversely impacted by the deregulation of the dairy industry. The program commenced with a survey of all dairy farmers in the region, followed by a series of information expos on rural diversification options in 2001 that attracted more than 1200 rural residents.

In response to a survey on topics of interest to visitors to the expos, a further series of five intensive one-day workshops were conducted on specific agribusiness diversification options during the first half of 2002. The workshops covered native flower production, aquaculture production, greenhouse production, organic production and macadamia production. Several of the workshops concluded with growers identifying industry development opportunities and/or proposing the formation of grower networks.

The Board subsequently proposed the establishment of an Emerging Industries Development Program, involving the employment of an industry development officer to further assist the advancement of the aquaculture, herbs and organics sectors. This eighteen-month program will be administered by the Board, is being jointly funded by the Federal and State Governments, and will commence in August 2003.

CREATIVE INDUSTRIES

A major challenge for many small to medium enterprises is accessing adequate demand/customers for their goods and services. Many small businesses lack the scale to be able to spend what is required to adequately market their goods and services, and in particular to expand their markets through exposure to potential customers out of their local area.

One economic development strategy that can directly benefit businesses (and thus stimulate employment) is the formation of common-interest networks to undertake collaborative marketing built around a unique product or area identity. Cash flow is the lifeblood of most small businesses, and increased sales can provide consolidation and expansion opportunities.

In partnership with Hastings Council who had recently been selected as the 4th City of the Arts, the Board initiated a collaborative marketing pilot for commercial visual artists in the Hastings LGA in mid-2002. Artists from throughout the area were offered the opportunity to participate in a high quality booklet titled "Hand made in the Hastings". The booklet was subsequently launched in August 2002, and showcased over thirty local artists and galleries. The Board produced and widely circulated a case study on the pilot, and with the Board's assistance the exercise has been or is being replicated by a number of the other LGAs in the region. Feedback from participants has indicated that the booklet has been successful in generating significant business, with a number of large (multi-thousand dollar) sales.

This exercise has been important in not only demonstrating the important contribution of the creative industries to the region's economy, but in illustrating what is possible with an innovative and carefully tailored approach to cost-effective collaborative marketing. Unique aspects of the project included the nature of the "product", the target market (local), the marketing vehicle (a collectible booklet), and focussed distribution. Planning is underway to initiate a similar marketing exercise for country-based businesses throughout the Mid North Coast.

REGIONAL MARKETING

The Board has a number of objectives that require the development of a clear, distinctive and widely accepted and recognised regional "identity" (or brand). One is the marketing of the region as a business investment destination. Another is gaining Government recognition for the unique economic development needs and challenges of the region. A third is as a symbol for a common purpose in partnerships working towards agreed regional goals.

The task of raising the profile of and gaining recognition for the Mid North Coast region has been complicated over recent years by a degree of internal and external confusion over the region's name, location and boundaries. In response to this complex situation the Board has worked to gain support for and consolidate a region name that business and the community can relate to.

The name Mid North Coast appears to be most widely and consistently used in the community and the media to refer to the area that extends north beyond the Hunter to the start of the Northern Rivers. The Board's consultation with a range of public and private sector stakeholders in the region has indicated a high level of support for the name Mid North Coast. The name was unanimously endorsed by representatives from across the region at a meeting of a regional development network in late 2002.

The Board subsequently reverted to the name Mid North Coast (dropping the Australia's Holiday Coast regional brand) in early 2003, and a Mid North Coast logo has also been produced. The Board continues to work towards enhancing the effectiveness of collaborative regional marketing activities.

INFORMATION COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY

From the outset the Board has identified Information Communications Technology (ICT) as a key facilitator in enabling economic development. In particular, ICT is pivotal in providing opportunities for improved efficiencies in existing businesses and for the establishment of location-independent new enterprises. The Board made representations to the Federal Government's Telecommunications Service Inquiry in 2000, and provided a written submission to the Regional Telecommunications Inquiry in September 2002.

The main thrust of the Board's submission to the Regional Telecommunications Inquiry was to express concern about the adequacy of community and business access to cost-effective high-speed Internet services in areas outside the major urban centres. Much of the region away from the major urban centres does not have access to adequate broadband services. While there is apparently excess capacity in the main urban centres, the region's ageing telecommunications infrastructure and topography mean that "the last mile" remains a major obstacle to providing moderately priced high-speed internet access to many rural residents.

The Board is awaiting the Federal Government's response to the Regional Telecommunications Inquiry to determine whether there may be opportunities to address, on a regional basis, existing ICT deficiencies in his region. The Board will reconvene a Regional ICT Planning Group if such opportunities arise. However, the absence of a regional telecommunications strategy remains an obstacle to clearly defining the real ICT needs of the region.

RESEARCH & PLANNING

The Board remains strongly committed to the development of a comprehensive, contemporary, research-based regional strategy that will provide a sound foundation for consensus on and a coordinated response to regional economic development challenges. An inclusive regional planning process can provide a framework to progress sustainable economic and social development by defining specific roles, delineating relationships and responsibilities and as a basis for implementing agreed strategies. A regional strategy would be complementary to and would support strategic plans developed at the local government level.

The Board has been an active participant in a regional planning initiative commenced by Planning NSW called **planFIRST**, and sought the early roll out of the process in this region. Since the State election in March 2003 and subsequent restructure of Departmental responsibilities the nature and extent of regional planning processes under **planFIRST** are being reviewed. The Board is waiting to see whether it will be required to initiate its own strategic planning process.

In respect to the issue of commissioning research that will provide a better understanding of the dynamics of the regional economy, in conjunction with the Area Consultative Committee and North Coast Institute the Board has initiated discussions with a highly respected economic research institute on the feasibility of developing a capability in this region that could service the ongoing needs of (and ultimately be funded by) a range of public and private sector clients. The Board has written to a range of key regional stakeholders seeking their views on this proposal, and plans to convene a regional consultative forum to explore options in September 2003.

The continuing absence of credible research on the forces driving the region's economy, as well as a regional strategy that defines common goals and provides a plan for future development, means that the region currently lacks "a strategic framework for sustainable economic growth". The Board sees the commissioning of appropriate economic research and formulation of a regional strategy as a top priority in building the region's capacity to respond effectively to economic challenges and to realise its economic potential.

OTHER REGIONAL INITIATIVES

In addition to the activities detailed above, the Board continues to make a contribution towards a range of local and regional initiatives through its active participation in consultative meetings, steering committees, regional networks and industry forums. The Board values the opportunities to participate in these activities.

BOARD ADMINISTRATION

The Board meets at different venues throughout the region every two months, and at these meetings considers ways in which it can make a significant and effective contribution towards regional economic development. The Board normally meets with local Councils and/or Council-sponsored economic advisory committees at the same time as it conducts its bi-monthly meetings.

During the 2002/2003 financial year the Board met at:

- Taree in July 2002;
- Bellingen in September 2002 (also Annual General Meeting);
- Macksville in November 2002;
- Kempsey in January 2003;
- Port Macquarie in March 2003; and
- Coffs Harbour in May 2003.

The Board seeks and welcomes submissions from both the public and private sectors on opportunities to facilitate regional economic development, and can seek funding to undertake specific projects from Federal and State funding bodies. Projects are typically undertaken in partnership with industry and other Federal, State and Local Government bodies.

The Board is supported by a full-time Executive Officer, Bill Calcutt, who can be contacted on 6583 5647, facsimile 6583 5285, email mncrdb@betterbusiness.nsw.gov.au. Further information on the Board's activities is available at www.betterbusiness.nsw.gov.au.

BOARD FINANCES

Regional Development Boards are provided with an annual (financial year) grant by the Department of State and Regional Development in order to maintain an administrative/functional capability independent of the Department. This funding enables the employment of a full time Executive Officer, and facilitates the operation of the Board. DSRD also assist by providing (gratis) office facilities at Port Macquarie for Board staff and some administrative support.

The Board currently employs two full-time staff on twelve month contracts. The contracts are renewable subject to satisfactory annual performance appraisals. Bill Calcutt is the Board's Executive Officer, and Lyndell Stone is the Project Officer for the Forestry Investment Program. The Board also employs a casual part-time accounts clerk (half day a fortnight).

The Board can and does seek funding from DSRD and other bodies to undertake or participate in specific regional development projects. During this financial year the Board secured funding of \$75,000 from Agriculture Fisheries Forestry Australia (AFFA) and \$50,000 from DSRD for the second year of the two-year Forestry Investment Program. The program is part of a national Regional Plantation Committee project that aims to foster the development of farm forestry and associated industries in regional Australia.

The Board also secured total funding of \$157,000 (GST excl) from DSRD and the Federal Department of Transport and Regional Services in order to undertake an eighteen-month program to assist several emerging agribusiness sectors. This program will commence in August 2003.

The Board has also secured funding of \$22,000 from DSRD as a 50% contribution towards a joint project with the North Coast Institute of TAFE to assess the training and technology needs of manufacturers across the North Coast (Northern Rivers and Mid North Coast regions).

A copy of the audit of the Board's finances for the 2002/2003 financial year by Potts Davis Duncombe is available on request.

BOARD MEMBERS' PROFILES

CHAIRPERSON (resigned January 2003)

Dr Dennis O'Brien was a senior lecturer in economics in the School of Commerce and Management at the Coffs Harbour campus of Southern Cross University. In addition to his extensive university responsibilities, Dr O'Brien had been involved with various community, economic and regional development organisations, including the Mid North Coast Regional Economic Development Organisation. He was a member of the previous Regional Development Board (1997-1999). Dr O'Brien resigned from the Board in January 2003 to take up a management/academic position in Victoria.

ACTING CHAIRPERSON (from February 2003)

Mr Ron McDermott is the General Manager of Taree boat builder Stebercraft Pty Ltd, and has had management experience in the commercial fishing, information technology and health service industries. He is involved with the Manning Valley Economic Development Planning Group, Oxley Island Drainage Union, Oxley Island Water Supply Scheme and Lower Manning Landcare Group. Mr McDermott lives in the Greater Taree LGA.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON (resigned November 2002)

Ms Jeny Wallace was the Executive Officer with the Taree-based Business Enterprise Centre, which serves the Greater Taree, Great Lakes and Gloucester LGAs. Ms Wallace had been involved in various community, economic and regional development organisations including as Executive Officer of the BEC Association of NSW, as a Councillor on Greater Taree City Council, and as a member of Australia's Holiday Coast Area Consultative Committee. Ms Wallace resigned in November 2002 to move to Canada.

ACTING DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON (from December 2002)

Ms Carmel Hong is Director, Educational Programs, North Coast Institute of TAFE, Coffs Harbour Education Campus. In addition to her varied educational roles, Ms Hong has had extensive strategic planning experience on committees at local, regional and state levels, contributing to the social and economic development of communities across the region. Ms Hong lives in the Nambucca LGA.

MEMBERS

Ms Sue Dethridge was a freelance writer with a background in journalism. She had lived on the Dorrigo Plateau since 1974, was elected to Local Government in 1987, and had served eight years as Mayor of Bellingen Shire Council. Ms Dethridge was a member of the previous Regional Development Board (1997-1999). Her outstanding service to the community was recognised in the 2003 Queen's Birthday Honours with the presentation of an Order of Australia Medal (OAM).

Ms Dethridge passed away on 12 June 2003 after a long battle with cancer. She leaves a legacy of principle and determination amongst her friends and colleagues on the Board.

Ms Jan Strom is a small business owner/operator who has played an active role in both local government and the business community over a number of years. Since 1999 she has served as Deputy Mayor of Coffs Harbour City Council. Ms Strom lives in the Coffs Harbour LGA. Ms Strom resigned from the Board in early 2003 in order to contest the State election as an independent.

Mr Graham Emzin has forty years experience in the tourism and hospitality industry, and most recently owned and operated a tourism accommodation business in Coffs Harbour for fifteen years. Mr Emzin is of Aboriginal/Islander descent, and lives in the Coffs Harbour LGA.

Ms Janet Hayes JP has a substantial record of involvement in community and Local Government, with a particular interest in youth and educational issues. She is on the Board of Resources NSW and has been appointed to the Dept of Corrective Services' Community Consultative Committee for the new correctional facility to be built in Kempsey. Ms Hayes is currently the Mayor of Kempsey Shire Council, and lives in the Kempsey LGA.

Mr Mark Livermore is the Manager of Hastings Cooperative Dairy Factory at Wauchope. He has had extensive experience in the dairy industry, and in a variety of roles has had to manage the challenges of organisational change. Mr Livermore lives in the Hastings LGA.

Mr Paul Sekfy is a Development Officer with the Mid North Coast Regional Council for Social Development. He has been active in regional economic and social development policy, projects, management and training for many years. He was a member of the previous Regional Development Board (1997-1998). Mr Sekfy lives in the Nambucca LGA.