

## BRIEFING NOTE

**To:** The Hon Nola Marino MP and DITRDC  
**From:** RDA Murray NSW  
**Submitted by:** Edwina Hayes – Director Regional Development and CEO, RDA Murray  
**Information Source:** RDA Murray and Murray Socio-Economic Activation Taskforce (MSEAT)  
**Date:** Monday 27 July 2020

---

The Murray Region border community of 135,000 NSW and approx. 200,000 VIC people are being significantly disadvantaged economically and socially by Emergency Public Health Orders in VIC and NSW.

Access to work, health and welfare services, family interaction, business delivery and development, banking, groceries and fresh food, sports and health activities are all impacted. Eg.

- The only office for Medicare, CentreLink and ATO services in the entire Border Zone is located in Albury NSW. (500kms East and 700kms West) nearest other service centres are Shepparton and Wangaratta (in Victoria) and Wagga (NSW.)
- Multicultural services, emergency relief casework, translators, caseworkers and trauma counsellors are located in Mildura VIC and Albury NSW and Wodonga VIC (600km apart)
- Pregnant women must apply for permits and pass through checkpoints to access basic perinatal care (Maternity Services are located in Wodonga VIC)
- Children and the families of children in hospital must also apply for permits (Paediatric Services are located in Albury NSW)
- Mental Health inpatient services are located in Albury
- Construction workers must self isolate for 14 days if part of their work is outside the Border Zone (many government supported projects have 'local' procurement which means supplies are accessed outside the Border Zone)
- Agricultural workers not being able to work because they are seasonal or from outside the zone
- Manufacturing and service industry employees are unable to work

People are working together

14 Councils have made collective recommendations to NSW Government regarding establishing a functional economic zone to enable people along the border to work.

12 Clubs along the border zone have made requests to NSW Government for support

Multicultural service sector has been supported by VIC Government to interpret and communicate restrictions

### Recommendation

- **That all Public Services to the region are increased and made mobile, visiting communities along the border to improve accessibility and assess and respond to COVID-19 outbreak and containment preparedness.**

### Bushfire Recovery area



-Horticultural Sector (Apples, Pears, Grapes, Berries) workforce challenges include accommodation rebuilding, sourcing farmworkers and construction businesses and contractors to remove rubbish, rebuild and plant as well as seasonal work.

-Red meat producers are focussed on fencing with workforce limitations

-Forestry focussed on clean up and safety on roads and infrastructure, nursery demand increases and planting preparation workforce and machinery availability issues.

-Access to farmworkers for harvest in Bushfire Recovery area of Snowy Valleys Council is being impacted by border closure because currently VIC 'seasonal' workers are excluded from NSW. Contractors who organise farmworkers are trying to source NSW workers but the usual sources are through word of mouth. RDA Murray are working with Multicultural NSW, NSW Training Services and DESE to support access to workers however it is a limited market at the moment because of Western Sydney location being restricted and lack of contemporary practice experience of many people who want to get into farm work

#### **Recommendation:**

- **That funding for accommodation construction be supported.**
- **That additional resources be allocated to source and connect workforce from NSW for seasonal farm work along the Murray Border**

#### **Seasonal Farm Workers and Migrant communities, Temporary Visa holders**

I visited the Balranald, Euston, Gol Gol and Buronga districts last week to collect information about economic and social impacts of COVID-19 and seasonal conditions. I interviewed representatives from Local Government (Balranald and Wentworth Shires), SMECC, VIC DPC-Colman Foundation and Mildura Regional Development as well as local farmers, community leaders, business owners and community members.

Up to 7,000 workers cross the border for work at Euston-Robinvale (3,500) and Buronga-Mildura (4,000). It is estimated by representatives of local service organisations; Sunraysia Mallee Ethnic Communities Council, VIC DPC, Mildura Regional Development, Wentworth and Balranald Councils that approximately 6,000 of them are workers who may or may not have the required identification photo and residential address matching permit details and holder of permit. Proof of residential address is particularly difficult as many farm workers do not have driver's licences or pay independently for rent, utilities etc.

Workers require ID that has photo and address to be eligible.

Contractors who organise farmworkers report some teams being refused entry to NSW while others are better organised and are getting teams across

The farm worker community and Contractors are known to be shy of high public visibility and authorities.

Reports of many people with lapsed visas or bridging visas

On-farm accommodation in Euston, NSW has been unusually full since March 2020 as workers were reluctant to move on after the table grape picking season

Motels in the NSW Sunraysia were at high capacity likely filled with Police, BorderForce ADF and displaced workers

- migrant communities at Robinvale and Mildura are at higher risk of unemployment, COVID -19 and exploitation due to the NSW-VIC Border closure
- Between 3,500 - 5,000 people may be unable to apply for a border permit for work, health, and welfare activities because they cannot prove their residential address.



- Rapidly rising rates of lapsing visas and bridging visas

#### RECOMMENDATION:

- **Additional resources be allocated (DoHA/Immigration/Border Force) to support at risk communities to apply for bridging visas in Robinvale, Mildura, Euston and Buronga-Gol Gol.**
- **A campaign to encourage migrants/temporary visa holders to seek assistance and apply for bridging visas along the NSW-VIC border.**

#### Clubs as employers and major economic drivers in border communities

Clubs on the Border have seen up to 95% trade affected because VIC members unable to attend venues.

Eg Murray Downs Golf and Country Club opp Swan Hill has closed and stood down 80 staff; 40 casuals not eligible for JobKeeper and 40 staff with reduced hours, 2FTE jobs lost. Estimated \$901,000 per month losses while closed. 64% reduction in Community Club Grants.

#### Recommendation:

- **That Clubs NSW request for Gaming Tax waiver in the Murray Zone is supported**

#### Aged Care COVID preparedness

Aged Care facilities along the NSW border zone are struggling to fill shifts due to NSW Emergency Public Health Orders. Staff are unable to work out of the designated Border Zone without “self isolating” for 14 days (or indefinitely as you continue working). These organisations were already operating with minimal staffing due to skills/staffing shortages. Evidence: RDA Murray has supported 2 Aged Care Nursing Homes in Deniliquin and Barham to recruit RNs through the SESR 491 Program in the past 6 months.

#### Recommendation:

- **That Aged Care Facilities be assessed for their ability to cope and provide adequate care during COVID and that Government support to ensure a minimum level of COVID preparedness is in place. Eg COVID-19 Infection Control Training and available stocks of PPE.**

Fresh produce disruptions to major supermarkets have been experienced as Companies changed from nearest Distribution Centres in VIC to Sydney, NSW. Issue resolved now but Supermarkets running out of fresh produce in 30 hours demonstrates the very real possibility of disruption to border people’s access to food.

#### Recommendation

- **Transport and Logistics assesses fresh food logistics contingency planning to regional areas to ensure supply is secure in the event of an outbreak in Western Sydney. (Woolworths, Coles and Aldi all have Distribution Centres near LGAs with warnings current)**



#### Getting On With It

- Bushfire Recovery support continues
- Matching employees with employers continues with MNSW contract to employ 0.8FTE for 8months in Migrant Economic participation role.

Edwina Hayes Ph: 0427 267 753  
29 July 2020

