

Rural and Remote Economic Stimulus Package

August 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the Australian economy, nowhere more so than in rural and remote parts of our country. Rural and remote populations already have poorer health outcomes and lower levels of access to healthcare. In these areas, the current economic hardship comes at a time when the impacts of widespread bushfires in early 2020, and a prolonged period of drought are still being felt.

Investment in infrastructure will be a key element of efforts to stimulate the Australian economy and promote recovery, and will be crucial in rural and remote areas. In addition to the raw economic benefit, investment in health infrastructure carries the additional benefit of helping to improve health outcomes over the long-term. However, investment in infrastructure alone will not overcome the poorer health outcomes experienced by those in rural and remote parts of our country.

Significant disparities in health outcomes persist with, for example, a life expectancy gap of over 17 years between those in our cities and those in remote areas; infant death rates more than twice as high; and higher rates of almost all chronic diseases. Recent RFDS research also shows that almost 43,000 people in rural and remote areas of Australia have no access to any primary healthcare services within a 60-minute drive time. This situation will only have been heightened by necessary limitations in service delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Efforts to stimulate rural and remote economic recovery, enhance infrastructure and support the industries in rural areas hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic should therefore be underpinned by a commitment and strategy to improve the health outcomes of those living in rural and remote areas.

With a service footprint spanning the majority of Australia's land mass, particularly across rural and remote areas, the Royal Flying Doctor Service (RFDS) is well placed to identify opportunities for investment in infrastructure projects for the benefit of, and with the support of, local communities.

With 77 aircraft at 23 aerobases, along with 140 road vehicles, the RFDS provides clinic services at almost 200 rural and remote sites. As an essential part of Australia's health system, the RFDS continues to provide vital emergency medical and primary health care services to rural and remote Australia throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. These services are delivered by air, by road and through technology systems such as telehealth, and include over 1,100 patient episodes of care for confirmed or suspected COVID-19 since February 2020.

The RFDS carefully identifies and plans necessary infrastructure projects that ensure the delivery of high quality health services. The RFDS has identified relevant projects throughout rural and remote Australia that, with investment from the Commonwealth Government, would stimulate local economies and assist recovery in these areas following the COVID-19 pandemic.

The RFDS proposes a Rural and Remote Economic Stimulus Package that will see:

- 1. Development of a 10-year roadmap to achieve better health outcomes for rural and remote Australians;***
- 2. Better health infrastructure in rural and remote areas;***
- 3. Support for rural and remote aviation; and***
- 4. Support for rural and remote tourism.***

The infrastructure proposals outlined in this submission will see the creation of local jobs in rural and remote locations, and provide long-term benefit to local communities – while at the same time building health service capacity to improve health outcomes for those in rural and remote Australia. The RFDS has a long history of engaging local contractors wherever possible to drive direct investment in each location, along with associated flow-on benefits in the community.

Providing the opportunity for immediate stimulus, projects proposed by the RFDS in this submission can be commenced in the short term, with some anticipated to be completed in three months. Further, this package is scalable, with projects able to be pursued relevant to available funding and in locations of priority. The RFDS can provide further detailed information and costings on each of the projects identified in this project on request.

Investment in RFDS health, aeromedical and tourism infrastructure projects in our rural and remote communities is an investment in Australia's economic recovery. A long-term commitment to improve health outcomes in these areas is fundamental in promoting the wellbeing of these communities into the future. The RFDS looks forward to discussing this package further and partnering with the Commonwealth Government to support recovery in rural and remote Australia.

1. Improving the health outcomes of rural and remote Australians

Despite efforts from consecutive Governments and service providers, many people in rural and remote Australia continue to experience significant difficulty in accessing adequate healthcare. This must be addressed as a priority, with a long-term commitment to invest in the health of rural and remote Australians, at the same time as investing in the recovery of rural and remote economies.

The need to reignite efforts to ensure reasonable and equitable access to primary healthcare has been highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic: Those in rural, and particularly remote, parts of our country have higher rates of hypertension, diabetes, coronary heart disease, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and renal disease, which render them more vulnerable should there be mass infections in their communities.

The Commonwealth Government, through the *Stronger Rural Health Strategy*, committed to ensuring “a sustainable, high quality health workforce that is distributed across the country according to community need, particularly in rural and remote communities”. These communities are in need now more than ever, and the RFDS seeks to work with the Australian Government in the development of a 10-year roadmap to improve the health outcomes of rural and remote Australians. This roadmap should ensure a sustainable strategy, identifying the necessary investment in services and infrastructure over the next decade, and taking into account recent service enhancements such as the growth in use of telehealth.

2. Ensuring better health infrastructure in rural and remote areas

There is substantial infrastructure in rural and remote communities that is not maintained as well as facilities in our cities. A number of RFDS bases, airports and clinic sites require renewal and upgrades to ensure patient outcomes and experience are optimised. Many bases and clinic locations were established decades ago, and after years of tireless service and continued patient demand, investment is needed to modernise and meet changing requirements. Identified projects include:

- **Upgrading Patient Transfer Facilities:** The construction of, or upgrades to, existing Patient Transfer Facilities that are imperative to patient safety, comfort and privacy during transit. Further, appropriate enhancements to Patient Transfer Facilities reduce the risk of adverse weather affecting service delivery and offer a resource appropriate to support future resilience to pandemic and natural disaster.

Potential locations include – Mount Isa, Hobart Airport, Launceston Airport, Dubbo Airport, Broken Hill Airport, Wilcannia, Bourke, Lightning Ridge, Mackay, Wellcamp Airport (Toowoomba), Emerald, Kingaroy, Aurukun, Kowanyama, Cooktown, Horn Island, Weipa, Normanton, Mount Gambier, Renmark, Port Pirie, Whyalla, Kadina, Port Lincoln, Ceduna, Port Augusta, Tennant Creek, Brisbane Airport as well as remote areas of Western Australia and Northern Territory, and regional areas of Victoria.

- **Upgrades to RFDS aeromedical bases:** Upgrades to existing RFDS aeromedical bases, to better serve operational needs in sites of high activity; meet clinical training and education needs; provide engineering and maintenance facilities; and improve the working environment for RFDS staff.

Potential locations include – Mount Isa, Townsville, Brisbane, Launceston, Alice Springs, Port Augusta, Kalgoorlie

- **Enhancing remote clinic facilities:** Construction of new and repairs, maintenance, automation and expansion of existing remote RFDS clinic facilities to best serve operational and clinical needs; meet emerging service delivery requirements such as telehealth and increased infection control as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic; and, improve the safety and working environment of RFDS staff.

Potential locations include – remote locations of New South Wales, Tasmania, South Australia, Queensland, Victoria and Western Australia.

3. Supporting rural and remote aviation

As one of the largest and most comprehensive aeromedical organisations in the world, the RFDS relies on a strong aviation sector and appropriate infrastructure. Aviation facilities in rural and remote areas have multiple purposes and are shared with local communities. The COVID-19 pandemic and associated travel restrictions have significantly impacted domestic and international aviation, and investment by governments will be crucial to recovery for this sector.

- **Upgrading rural and remote airstrips:** A number of airstrips used by the RFDS in rural and remote locations have been approved for upgrade or extension under the Commonwealth's Remote Airstrip Upgrade Program. The RFDS proposes that these projects be brought forward to provide more immediate stimulus in local communities, assisting with local employment, and providing better access for emergency services and others. In addition, further remote locations should be identified.

Locations include: St Helens, Cape Barren, Wilcannia (already approved)

Potential locations include: Remote areas of Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia.

- **PC-12 Simulator:** There is currently no PC-12 simulator capability in Western Australia, South Australia or the Northern Territory. As a result, training is undertaken in overseas facilities and in operational aircraft, which has negative impacts on budget and response capability. A dedicated PC-12 training simulator will provide the opportunity for more cost-effective, targeted and sophisticated training for both the RFDS as well as other PC-12 operators throughout Australia.
- **Installation of aviation/weather stations in remote areas with no existing coverage:** There are a vast number of 'black spots' existing within the CASA approved weather station network, resulting in aircraft (including RFDS) having no prediction of weather and conditions ahead. Pilot ground station hubs that provide local weather conditions, satellite connectivity and emergency contact phone have been trialled in Collarenebri New South Wales, and can be rolled out across remote areas nationally to significantly improve aviation planning and safety.

Potential locations include: Remote areas of New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Northern Territory and Western Australia.

4. Supporting rural and remote tourism

Tourism, for rural and remote Australia, is the economic life-blood that keeps communities afloat. Those that live and work in the bush rely on people holidaying, exploring and travelling the back-roads. Like the aviation sector, the COVID-19 pandemic and associated travel restrictions has seen a significant and detrimental impact on tourism in Australia. This includes rural and remote locations where local economies heavily rely on both domestic and international visitors.

- **Developing new tourism infrastructure:** A number of existing RFDS bases have significant tourist facilities, and there is interest in further developing these in many more communities. Building multimedia centres with broader tourism capabilities; education for the community on first aid principles in the outback (reducing the number of medical evacuations); and, collaborative local council/shire/state tourism projects will encourage domestic travel and boost local economies in retail, food and accommodation.

Potential locations include: Broken Hill, Essendon, Adelaide, Alice Springs, Broome and Cairns.

- **Historical research, archiving and preservation:** The RFDS story and founder, the Reverend John Flynn, are featured on the \$20 Australian bank note however, as the Service approaches its centenary, a significant project is needed for the archival and historic restoration of RFDS artefacts. From planes and vehicles, to medical chests and equipment, from charts and maps, to uniforms, patient and staff stories. The RFDS past is as colourful as the Australian landscape and preservation of this past to integrate into RFDS tourism centres and local, state and national museums will boost local employment opportunities and provide long-lasting tourism attractions for domestic and international audiences.

Potential locations include: Greater Melbourne, Moliagul (Reverend John Flynn's birthplace), Adelaide, Alice Springs, Broken Hill, Dubbo, Meekatharra, Cairns, Mount Isa, Longreach, Canberra.

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