Regional Development Australia
WHEATBELT WA

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Committee Secretary
Select Committee on the Reform of the Australian Federation
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Australia

RE: SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE REFORM OF THE AUSTRALIAN FEDERATION

Dear Committee Secretary

Please accept this letter as a submission to the review of Australian Federation Reform. This submission is made on behalf of Regional Development Australia Wheatbelt Inc., and relates to item (b) (v) in the terms of reference; strategies for strengthening Australia's regions and the delivery of services through regional development committees and regional grant programs.

As you will be aware, Regional Development Australia (RDA) is an initiative of the Commonwealth government that aims to enhance the growth and development of regional areas by bringing together the three levels of government to provide a strategic and targeted response to issues in regional areas. There are 55 RDA committees representing regional areas across the country.

There are five core functions that underpin the role of the national network of RDA committees:

1) Consultation and engagement with local communities and other stakeholders to identify, prioritise and find solutions to issues impacting on the region
2) Contribute to informed regional planning
3) Contribute to whole of government activities by providing information on regional issues and supporting the implementation of regional programs and initiatives
4) Promote Government programs by creating awareness of services, grants and initiatives for regional development, and supporting stakeholders to gain access to these
5) Support community and economic development through the identification of opportunities to diversify and expand industry and employment opportunities in the region

The concept behind the RDA committees is commendable, and if the model worked as well as it reads on paper then the service and support delivered to all regions of Australia would be invaluable. Unfortunately like a lot of well meaning initiatives the reality of the delivery of RDA's is not as effective as it could and should be.

RDA committees are provided with base operational funding that supports the employment of one Executive Officer and a support person and allows for limited engagement and consultation activities within our regions. Additional funding for the committees is expected to come from third party contracts. The expectations placed on the RDA committees to deliver on real outcomes for the regions with such minimal funding are unrealistic. In order to truly

add value and make a real difference the committees need more resources, both financial and people, so that we can be on the ground in our regions delivering on solutions to the many and varied issues that impact on rural and regional areas of Australia.

In addition to a lack of financial support from the government, the RDA network's role as a two-way conduit of information is viewed by many as a farce given that we often receive no feedback to acknowledge that the information and advice we provide has been received or that it is going to be acted on. A sentiment that is all too often relayed to me by local governments and community members is that there is no point in them participating in forums or consultations about regional issues because there are never any outcomes for their effort. For this component of the RDA networks role to be effective a clear communication framework needs to be set in place to ensure that; (a) the information we provide is received at the appropriate level and; (b) we are given timely feedback that we can take back to the communities to show that they are being heard.

Under the old Area Consultative Committee banner the network of RDA's demonstrated their ability to deliver regional grants through the Regional Partnerships program. This program, whilst having some fundamental flaws, was invaluable in enabling some great regional projects to get off the ground. This program has now essentially been replaced by the Royalties for Regions program at a WA state level. Whilst the Royalties for Regions program has been an enabler of a number of very worthwhile projects in this state, the bucket of money is not endless and it means that a lot of much needed work is still going undone. There is a need for a greater level of collaboration and understanding between the three levels of Government (i.e. federal, state and local), about where funding for regional initiatives will come from. The ideal solution would be a proportionate contribution from local, state and federal governments toward regional infrastructure (and other) projects that will contribute to the economic and social growth and development of regional areas.

There are numerous organizations (including state and federal government departments and agencies) and community groups working toward growth and development of regional areas across Australia. This demonstrates that there is a significant need for this type of work to be carried out; however what this also highlights is that there is potentially a lot of overlap in the activities that these organizations and groups are undertaking. To avoid having multiple groups conducting the same activities there needs to be a better coordination of services so that rather than doing the same thing numerous times and in numerous different ways it is done once and done really well. Whilst being a facilitator of regional collaboration is already a focus for RDA committees, due to our limited resources our efforts are not always successful as momentum can be lost when other more pressing matters come to light. If RDA committee's were provided with additional resources they would be in a better position to take a leading role in bringing together the broad cross-section of agencies to deliver optimal on the ground support to local communities.

Australia is a vast continent with drastically varying environments and because of this a "one size fits all" will never be appropriate. Maintaining a regional presence of Government departments and agencies and increasing the scope for local decision making, will possibly have the greatest impact on improving support and services for regional development. It is essential to have a local presence and allow local issues to be addressed at a local level because centralised decision makers cannot truly grasp the unique context of each region in this country. RDA committees across the board, with the right level of support and commitment from the Federal government are in a prime position to provide effective advice and run key programs that make a real difference in rural and regional Australia.

Should you have any questions or require further information please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely

R Burges

Rebekah Burges