

# *Smartrivers*

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9 March 2017

Committee Secretary  
Senate Finance and Public Administration Committees  
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Canberra ACT 2600  
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**RE: The operation, effectiveness, and consequences of the Public Governance, Performance and Accountability (Location of Corporate Commonwealth Entities) Order 2016**

Dear Committee Secretary

Smartrivers is pleased to present the following submission to the Senate inquiry into the relocation of government bodies to regional areas.

**About Smartrivers**

We represent a dedicated group of irrigators in the Lower Balonne area who are committed to maintaining the health of the river system and our community. We have been working with government, scientists and environmentalists for a long period of time to understand the river's function and develop management arrangements that meet the needs of all.

We support a whole of community approach for engagement and problem solving with active participation of irrigators, environmentalists, graziers, small business, banking and indigenous interests.

The viability of our regional communities is important to us. We support the initiative by the Australian Government to consider injecting much needed investment into regional areas.

## **Terms of Reference**

### ***The process leading to the making of the order.***

Towns should be given the opportunity to present a capability statement about what they can offer to receive government departments, staff and families. Towns have different and unique qualities that would be attractive to departments depending on their focus and needs.

The process leading to the decision of relocating a government department should involve criteria specifying the needs of the department based on their functions, and an opportunity for towns to tender based on their capability to fulfil the criteria, as well as additional benefits to both.

Where department services are not location dependent there are endless opportunities to be welcomed into towns that offer quality lifestyles and access to housing, education, health and recreation. Centralisation of services have left smaller communities with facilities, assets and capabilities that could once again be utilised to their fullest extent, delivering savings to government and benefits to local councils, businesses and communities.

Where government department charters are relevant to specific regions, there should be consideration for relocation out of Canberra and cities and into the regions which they are accountable to. There are opportunities for real partnerships between government, industry and community stakeholders which would be better served from within the regions.

Opportunities for collaboration should be actively pursued. Our community, environment and local economy are feeling the consequences of government department decisions and delivery of policy made without firsthand knowledge and experience of our environment and community. The consequence of not having a regional presence has led to poor policy performance and public accountability in delivery of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan.

Good decision making regarding the placement of regional based government departments will provide mutually beneficial outcomes for government performance and accountability to communities.

### ***The policy of relocating corporate Commonwealth entities with agricultural policy or regulatory responsibilities.***

The Murray-Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) is a regulatory body that should have regional based offices for their River Management division, Policy and Planning division and Environmental Management division where roles relate to the monitoring, planning and management of the Northern Basin.

The relocation of MDBA divisions to locations they are responsible for managing will have a positive impact on the ability of the Authority to perform its functions. Decisions and implementation of actions will be better informed and have proper consideration of sustainable triple bottom line impacts and outcomes. Monitoring programs in particular will benefit from having researchers gaining ongoing and firsthand experience of river system functions, changes and responses in natural and managed situations. The regional communities affected by water buy-back will be given an injection of investment, commitment and re-population of areas to rebuild services and economies.

It is our recommendation that the MDBA relocate staff within divisions managing the Northern Basin Plan to the townships of Dirranbandi and St George. The relocation of the MDBA makes sense to help deliver a more realistic and empathetic approach to river management that achieves triple bottom line outcomes.

Any government department or business is welcome to St George and Dirranbandi. The benefits are wide ranging and we believe it would be a smart move for any organisation. There is existing government infrastructure that is suitable for offices to minimise relocation costs and ongoing rent and maintenance. There are also commercial and business facilities available. Housing is very affordable and our communities enjoy a range of essential government services including good health and education, and regular flights to Brisbane. Plus, we have a beautiful river to enjoy.

Technology and modern communication provides for the effective and capable delivery of business from remote areas. Regional Australia is fast becoming a hub for entrepreneurs and industry diversification with advance applications in technology, remote sensing and IT. Regions are innovative, resourceful and value collaboration. Business, telecommunication, agriculture, energy, environment and transport departments and organisations would be well suited to regional based centres. In particular, Dirranbandi and St George communities would welcome the opportunity to present a capability statement to highlight the huge potential for cost savings and business benefits.

***Any other related matters.***

Development of irrigated agriculture had once supported a strong foundation for population, skills, income, infrastructure and services, providing substantial qualitative social benefits for the local community. However, the reduction in available water for irrigation, has resulted in drastic and detrimental flow on impacts to the reliant communities. Achieving a critical mass in size and economic activity is essential for the townships of St George and Dirranbandi and hosting new organisations and developments would be mutually beneficial.

Decentralisation is essential to growing a skilled workforce in regional areas for our children and grandchildren as well as for businesses, families and investors.

***Request for public hearing***

Smartdrivers welcomes the opportunity to have a public hearing in our community to share our enthusiasm for decentralisation of government services for better governance, effectiveness, performance and accountability of regulatory departments.

Regards

Frank Deshon  
Joint President

Ian Todd  
Joint President