



POLICY PLATFORM 2011-12



**Think Local.
Vote National.**

THE NATIONALS *for Regional Australia*



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Foreword

In 2009 The Nationals set out a policy platform covering 12 key subjects, ranging from taxation to regional health, vital to the future social and economic wellbeing of people living outside the major cities.

As the only party dedicated to regional Australia, and to the one third of Australians who choose to make their homes, work or operate their businesses in regional Australia, our concern for the future increases with every day that Labor remains in Government.

Our resolve to get a fair deal for regional Australia intensifies each day as we witness the waste of resources, poor economic management, and neglect of regional centres and primary industry, by this Labor Government.

As Nationals we hold firm beliefs about Regional Australia:

- That regional Australia is critical to the future of our nation. The increasing social, economic and environmental importance of the areas beyond the metropolitan cities means that regional populations must grow, and contribute to the emergence of a 'new economy'. In a resource-hungry world, regional Australia holds the key.
- Unlocking regional potential demands vision, good planning and far-sighted management. Providing and applying those attributes is the prime task of the Federal Nationals, and of their State counterparts.
- Unlocking that potential also requires that a fair share of public and private investment goes to services and infrastructure in regional Australia. Fighting to make sure that regional Australia gets its fair share is our second task.

- Unlocking the potential riches of the regions also requires us to ensure that policy making is not done clumsily, or in an ill thought-out way. Regional Australia has the most to lose from the unintended consequences of knee-jerk national policies which impact on local industries and the jobs they bring. Services are reduced, and costs to businesses and households are driven up. Protecting the vulnerability of regional Australia from city-centric policies is thus our third task.

In 2010 the platform was expanded to 15 policies and now in 2011 has been developed further to incorporate specific plans covering the following 20 categories:

- Better Communications
- Defence and Border Protection
- Economy and Taxation
- Education
- Environment
- Australian Families
- Food Security
- Indigenous Policy
- Primary Production
- Regional Development
- Regional Health
- Regional Youth
- Respect and Practical Help for Seniors
- Small Business and Tourism
- Social Justice
- Trade
- Transport
- Cleaner Transport Fuels
- Water Assets
- Women in Regional Australia

In addition we continue to contribute in areas like foreign relations, national security, consumer

affairs, workplace relations and resources and energy.

The Nationals understand that a thriving and healthy economy is the basis of all social good. Regional Australia is usually hit first, hardest and longest during recessionary times. We know that wild deficit budgeting and overhanging debt will rob future generations of this country's hitherto enviable standard of living.

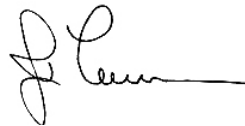
Our first priority on winning back government will be to work at restoring the budget surplus and at repaying the terrifying debt amassed by this Labor Government.

We know that on coming to Government hard decisions will have to be made to pare back expenditure for several years to bring the Budget back into surplus and that it is only then that our policy platform will be able to be fully realised.

Nevertheless, there will be the opportunity in the first years of government to realise some expenditure outside the savings umbrella through reallocation of resources. Our first priority will be funding for the Fair Share Fund, education, health and increased resources for the role of quarantine in protecting our borders.

As Nationals, we commit ourselves to delivering security, opportunity and prosperity to regional Australia. We believe in rewarding individual effort and achievement; in ensuring that all Australians have fair access to services such as health and education, and in building the necessary high quality infrastructure around the country. We believe in looking after those who are unable to care for themselves, and in demonstrating a practical compassion.

While subject to ongoing development and review, this document will form the blueprint for The Nationals policy platform for the next Federal Election.



JOHN TANNER
Federal President



PETER LANGHORNE
Chairman, Standing Policy Committee

Telecommunications and Information Technology

— connecting regional Australians to affordable new technologies

Effective telecommunications unite Australians wherever they work, live and play in local, national and, increasingly, global communities.

Quality, reliable telephone services, high-speed internet access and broadcast infrastructure are essential to ensure regional Australians fully participate in the ever-evolving social and economic benefits of state-of-the-art communications and information technologies.

Communications networks will deliver more timely and greater access to improved health services, open a new world of education options, drive employment and create business opportunities in regional Australia.

No-one understands the vital role communications play in regional Australia like the people who live there. The Nationals will bridge the communications divide between the regions and capital cities, prioritising planning and rollout of communications infrastructure.

Education and healthcare delivery are increasingly underpinned by telecommunications. These services are keys to social cohesion, participation in the local communities and the broader economy, cultural wellbeing and access to emergency services.

In distant communities, telecommunications are not nice extras... they are necessities.

Our pledge is that regional Australians are entitled to access high quality, timely and affordable communication and information technologies – both existing and emerging products and services.

From that base, the sky is no limit with the emerging opportunities for regional families, businesses and communities including access to:

- High-speed broadband internet;
- Timely and accurate weather forecasts from the Bureau of Meteorology;
- Voice over internet telephony;
- Free-to-air and subscription digital television;
- Online services for banking, bill payment, shopping, buying and selling on auction websites;
- Government services;
- Educational materials at all levels of schooling and, increasingly tertiary studies;
- Future commercial television video-on-demand services delivered online – already available other countries, such as Hong Kong and South Korea;
- Video conferencing;
- Telemedicine services, whether voice over telephony or via video webcam – a direct link to a doctor who can be anywhere in Australia or the world, just a click away;
- Streaming media, allowing users to listen to online radio and watch online TV programs, as well as a host of other audio-visual options;
- Improved mobile phone and digital television networks;
- Ongoing commitment to a communications ‘black spot’ program; and
- Support for community radio – which fills gaps left by bigger providers, particularly in emergencies, such as bushfires or floods.

Our Plan

We will bring down the regulatory barriers that discourage private enterprise from entering the communications market to provide parity of service and price to regional Australians.

In this new regulatory environment, we will reward initiative and support those providers servicing the regions.

No single technology or network can provide efficient and cost-effective communications services, in particular broadband, to all regional areas. It is, therefore, essential to develop a suite of communications infrastructure appropriate to the vast array of regional needs taking into account the diversity of Australia's regional communities – including the supply of satellite phone services to remote towns.

To fully integrate regional Australians into the global community, communications infrastructure must be fast-tracked in areas of greatest need. While the market will almost always meet the communications needs of people in capital cities, government intervention is necessary to ensure market failure gaps are filled and the needs of regional and remote parts of Australia are met.

Broadband

The rollout of a fast and cost-effective broadband network to transcend distances so regional Australians can be real-time active players in national and global digital economies is a priority for The Nationals.

Lack of access to infrastructure is a major obstacle to new telecommunications companies wishing to compete in regional areas. More often than not carriers find the cost of establishing new infrastructure in regional and remote areas is prohibitive, particularly when they are unsure of market demand.

Typically, lower population densities cannot deliver the economies of scale required to generate investment. Where the market cannot sustain a variety of networks in regional areas, The Nationals insist that government has a responsibility to provide an affordable single network.

Therefore, public and private partnerships can be an appropriate and innovative vehicle for delivering telecommunications infrastructure.

Labor has fundamentally misunderstood the market and the problem. Broadband speeds of 100Mbps are already available to commercial and home users in some capital cities where, as demand grows for higher speeds, the market will continue to meet it.

The federal government does not need to help these providers. However, it does have a role in helping regional areas where the commercial case is not strong enough to drive delivery of high speed services.

In regional Australia, the greatest productivity gains will be made from high speed broadband. The Nationals' policy is to place a priority on rolling out fibre optic cable to the majority of consumers in regional Australia first – that is, before cable roll-out occurs in areas where competition is already driving provision of higher broadband speeds.

While fibre optic cable is regarded as the preferred data carrying technology for the foreseeable future, other technologies such as wireless (fixed and mobile) and satellite continue to develop, delivering ever-faster data speeds. These technologies may provide innovative, effective and efficient answers to many of the communications problems presented by Australia's unique population spread.

Developments in existing technologies will invariably be marketed in cities first, where

commercial returns are most attractive, which exacerbates the telecommunications technology divide between city and regional Australia.

The Nationals, therefore, support the continuing extension of the optic fibre network to regional and remote communities currently relying on wireless and microwave technology. We support the continued presence of Telstra in regional communities, including the physical presence of Telstra Country Wide offices in strategic locations.

Fund to ensure the regions are not left behind

Mobile phone coverage is a continuing concern and, again, the service will not be provided in some parts of Australia unless supported by the government and community.

The previous Coalition Government established a standing \$2 billion telecommunications fund to ensure perpetual upgrades to new technologies and services to regional Australia as they became available – in essence ‘future proofing’ regional Australia in the fast-paced field of technology advances.

A central plank of our telecommunications platform is reinstating that fund to ensure that regional Australia’s telecommunications services – and the families, businesses and entire communities that rely on them – are not left with antiquated technologies and services and allowed to fall behind the rest of Australia and the world.

Black spot program

We will also reintroduce a mobile phone ‘black spot’ program to identify and redress areas of poor mobile phone reception and ensure that mobile networks are affordable.

The Nationals will ensure there are sufficient digital TV broadcasting towers in regional Australia to guarantee that acceptable reception is available to all viewers before switching off the analogue terrestrial signal, including the update of 600 self-help sites across Australia at no additional cost to providers.

World-class communications infrastructure and services must be a priority for any government.

This requires ongoing policy development, management and the ability of all Australians to keep pace with existing technologies, but also the next generation of technological developments.

Spending tens of billions of dollars and laying cable all over the country will not fix prevailing problems, nor safeguard Australians – especially, susceptible regional Australians – against growing disparities as new technology come online.

The Nationals’ approach strikes a competitive balance between carriers, establishes a fair and transparent regulatory structure, and accommodates new technologies and solutions as they become available, to deliver timely, effective and affordable services suitable for all Australians.

Defence and Border Protection

— self-determination, safety, checks-and-balances

Federal funds assure the defence and security of this nation and its people. This core responsibility of government is one where Australians rightly expect that what needs to be done will be done, and that the funding will be available.

Australia's defence force, customs and quarantine protection demand strategic forward-planning to keep pace with emerging trends and new threats. They also demand rigorous and prudent financial management.

Our defence forces must maintain combat readiness and our serving men and women must be equipped with state-of-the-art technology and logistical support. Their goals must be realistic, enhance our defence capabilities and be geared to tangible results in our national interests.

For example, the effective location of defence facilities across regional Australia is vital to any comprehensive defence strategy, both for the nation and for its regional development. The timely deployment of personnel and resources to military hot spots – globally, in our region and domestically – also demands a significant presence in regional Australia.

The Nationals, therefore, oppose the removal of existing defence facilities from regional areas. In fact, to better serve Australia's defence interests, we will move to identify those defence facilities currently in major population centres which can be decentralised and to house as many as possible in regional areas of Australia.

Of course, protecting our borders goes beyond military considerations. Regional Australians know that our singular pest and disease-free status is crucial to the productive capacity and marketing of our food and fibre domestic and export industries.

Labor's disgraceful abandonment of sound science-based quarantine and biosecurity safeguards and lowering resources to sub-optimal levels, is alarming. This neglect is reflected in Labor's approach to securing our borders against illicit drugs, illegal fishing crews, and people smuggling.

Defence

The Nationals' defence force strategy combines several initiatives to back our troops and allied personnel with the equipment and support necessary for a strong, cohesive and well co-ordinated military.

Our Plan

- We will ensure that Australia's defence procurement program targets sufficient resources to modernise military equipment, in consultation with serving personnel and other expert input.
- Resources will be directed for the appropriate maintenance of existing equipment, and the decommissioning of equipment and facilities that have reached their use-by date.
- We will rationalise the resources dedicated to the civil side of defence, redirecting the savings to frontline readiness to ensure our on-the-ground military capabilities are maximised.
- Training facilities, including the Royal Military College Duntroon, will be given high priority in the defence budget.
- Once-and-for-all, ample recognition will be made of the service of our military and their families. With Australian forces deployed in

many active theatres of war, support services for the injured and those who may not return at all must match the sentiments of a grateful nation. The military, and their families, are entitled to expect nothing less and must be guaranteed peace of mind.

- We will support the needs of ex-service personnel and, in particular, provide appropriate health services, access to facilities and appropriate pensions for those that have been physically or psychologically injured in the service of the nation. This must ensure for them a standard of living based on that which would apply had they not been injured.
- We will increase the number of defence establishments and housing in regional areas to facilitate rapid deployment as needs arise.
- We will champion and support more women in pursuing careers in the defence forces, and work towards a supportive culture for their advancement.
- We will establish a Defence Industry Advocate to assist the Australian defence forces in their dealings with the Defence Minister's office.
- Free health and dental care will be extended to all Australian defence force personnel and their dependents in close proximity to defence establishments across the country.
- We will provide additional support for the successful ADF Gap Year Program.

Border protection

Our traditional ideals of national security, protection from organised crime, and a robust and orderly immigration regime are increasingly under siege. The Australian Customs and Border Protection Service, with elements of the defence forces, provide the frontline in restoring and maintaining the integrity of our borders.

Our Plan

- The Nationals will restore trust in the integrity of our border protection system by providing additional equipment and personnel.
- We commit to the re-introduction of Temporary Protection Visas and to the re-opening of the Australian-funded detention centre on Nauru to process existing arrivals and deter illegal immigration in the future.
- We will ensure that Navy and Customs personnel have the right modern equipment to stop illegal entry into Australia and to defeat unscrupulous people smugglers.
- A major review of the structure of border protection services will ensure that resources at the bureaucratic level are streamlined to maximise front line resources and effort.
- We will increase cargo screening at ports and airports. This will mean greater scrutiny over a greater proportion of our air and sea cargo. There will be more screening and inspections for the illicit goods which threaten our communities and especially our regional industries, such as agriculture.

The Economy and Taxation

— reinvesting in regional Australia

The Nationals' highest priority is to rebuild a strong economy, restore confidence and usher in a new era of growth, prosperity and opportunity in Australia's regions.

Strong economic management means lower taxes and downward pressure on interest rates. It means more funds to invest in health and education, national security and productivity spurring infrastructure.

Debt and deficit spending rob future generations of the autonomy and standard of living, especially if the money is not invested in productive economic infrastructure.

At our core we believe private enterprise is the foundation of the nation's economy, with a fair and equitable taxation system that guards against disadvantage for those people living and working in regional Australia.

Our Plan

From Opposition, we face a familiar challenge. In 1996 we inherited \$96 billion of Labor debt and paid it off. It was a long and hard road to recovery, but, together, as a community, we got there.

In 2007 Labor inherited a \$20 billion budget surplus and boasted it would deliver a \$22 billion surplus the following financial year. In fact, they delivered a \$27 billion deficit, followed by a \$55 billion deficit and now a \$49 billion deficit in the 2011-12 financial year.

The Nationals have continually called on the Labor Government to outline a credible plan to repay the \$150 billion of debt, amounting to \$12,314 for every Australian taxpayer, that it has accrued since coming to power in 2007. However, not unexpectedly Labor has been incapable of doing this. The Nationals are committed to returning the

federal budget to surplus and beginning to repay the mammoth debt accumulated by Labor.

What business – big and small – needs to return to a positive outlook that promotes investment, expansion and growth is a government committed to sound fiscal management. That's also a recipe for more jobs, better jobs and job security to give working families confidence.

We will ensure that savings recognise regional Australia as the generator of Australia's real wealth, and regional recovery as fundamental to restoring economic growth and prosperity.

Lower taxes, less spending and lower interest rates are in The Nationals' DNA – priorities that come about for all the right reasons. Australians, especially those in the regions, are struggling under mounting cost of living pressures, while business and consumer confidence are rock bottom.

Carbon tax

Adding to those woes for families and business are almost daily announcements of more jobs being shed. People, already under pressure, are to be burdened by Labor's ever-growing carbon tax – the biggest in the world.

This economy-wide, job-destroying, confidence-sapping carbon tax is a dead weight around the necks of every business, worker, farmer, senior and family... and all for no environmental gain.

We are opposed to it and, in government, we will repeal it.

An economic environment conducive to wealth creation, productivity growth and job creation are all cornerstones of Nationals philosophy and policy.

Wealth for the regions

When wealth is generated in a region a fair share of the resulting government revenue should be returned to that region, and to regional Australia more generally. The Nationals' Western Australian Royalties for Regions policy is based on that equity principle, as is The Nationals' Victorian Regional Growth Fund and The Nationals' New South Wales Restart NSW Fund.

At the federal level, we will ensure that a share of Petroleum Resource Rent Tax from offshore oil and gas developments is applied directly to regional Australia.

The Nationals also advance fairness in spending. Residents in the capital cities see a larger proportion of their taxation dollar spent on services in their communities than people living in the regions.

We will support the creation of a substantial 'Regional Fair Share Fund' over four years with funding to made for:

- Projects approved by Regional Development Australia boards on a dollar for dollar basis with State and Territory Governments; and
- Local Government infrastructure projects.

Zonal Taxation

The Nationals support increasing zone tax allowances to five local government areas, on a trial basis, selected by the Federal Government on their potential to create sustainable economic development and growth, link with existing transport corridors and encourage development over a broader area, reduce welfare dependency in remote areas and contribute a saving to the budget and reduce indigenous disadvantage.

Personal tax reform

Dissatisfaction with the complexity and unfairness of the present personal taxation system should not be accepted simply on the basis that it is just too hard to fix. The Nationals' will review the system with a view to fairness for all citizens and, in particular, ensuring it does not disadvantage those on lower incomes and pensions.

We also recognise the role regional areas can, and must, play in overcoming Australia's national challenges. Unless we, as a nation, can bring businesses and people to regional cities and develop new commercial hubs, the projected 36 million people who will call Australia home by 2050 will grind our cities into gridlock.

Tax incentives

Governments cannot make people move to regional areas, but they can create the business case for start-up or relocating commercial operations with help of innovative tax breaks. People will follow worthwhile employment opportunities for themselves and their families.

And the government can take the lead by relocating government departments and agencies to regional centres.

Taxation treatment of Water Infrastructure

The Nationals in government will reintroduce full tax deductibility for water infrastructure expenses in the financial year following that in which the cost was incurred.

Domestic relocation

Overwhelmingly, the majority of unemployed Australians live in our capital cities. Government policies should enable them to move to jobs in regional areas.

The drought, global economic downturn and floods last summer have masked a critical workforce shortage across regional Australia. In agricultural alone around 100,000 jobs – some 80,000 skilled jobs and 22,000 entry-level positions – will go begging as farm production kicks back into full gear.

Young, mobile welfare recipients who refuse to take up gainful employment in the regions should not expect to continue to receive those benefits. Welfare and disability reforms must take account of the opportunities in the regions and the great lifestyles that are available.

Welfare and disability reforms must take account of the opportunities in the regions and the great lifestyles that are available.

Bonded migration

In addition to getting more Australians into the regions, tying new migrants to regional locations experiencing skilled and non-skilled labour shortages can help fill the gaps. This is not a new idea. Under the Medical Rural Bonded Scholarship Scheme, doctors are required to live and work in rural areas for a minimum of five years.

What business – big and small – needs to return to a positive outlook that promotes investment, expansion and growth is a government committed to sound fiscal management. That's also a recipe for more jobs, better jobs and job security to give working families confidence.

Infrastructure bonds

The Nationals support the introduction of an Infrastructure Partnerships Scheme to provide targeted tax concessions to infrastructure projects of national significance helping to attract some of the \$1.4 trillion Australians have invested in superannuation.

Small Business Action Plan

At The Nationals, we don't just want to talk about tax relief, we want to deliver it. Especially for the engine room of our national economy, small business.

We saw the writing on the wall for Australia's two-speed economy two years ago in formulating our tax relief response for small businesses caught out by global economic fluctuations.

Our 'Small Business Action Plan' enables tax loss carry-back, allowing businesses to offset operating losses and retain staff by claiming back taxes paid over the last three years.

Under our plan, it is available for losses up to a \$100,000 limit. It provides specific tax relief for struggling small businesses.

Mortgage insurance

The Nationals support mechanisms to increase the transparency and portability of mortgage insurance, including the introduction of a compulsory fact sheet outlining options available to borrowers prior to them signing loan agreements and a compulsory refund schedule for those borrowers wishing to switch lenders.

National disaster fund

The Nationals will establish a National Disaster Fund that is managed and administered independently of the Federal Government and that the fund initially be established through the budget process with money hypothecated and separately accounted for.

Flood insurance

The nationals will ensure that insurance companies have a clear and uniform definition of flooding.

Conclusion

The Nationals will:

- Review the zonal taxation allowances and, as appropriate, replace them with a new system that provides an increased allowance to those living in the most remote locations.
- Promote investment in regional businesses.
- Support the introduction of an Infrastructure Partnerships Scheme.
- Support mechanisms to increase the transparency and portability of mortgage insurance
- Establish a National Disaster Fund.
- Increase competition in the banking sector through mutual financial institutions.
- Continue to pursue a lower marginal tax level for individuals.
- Grow the population of the regions by creating new employment opportunities and gearing migration policies to meet regional needs.
- Ensure that taxes and charges imposed by the Federal Government do not disadvantage regional businesses compared to international competitors.
- Reintroduce full tax deductibility for water infrastructure expenses in the financial year following that in which the cost was incurred.
- Promote a flexible workplace relations system that is fair and takes account of the special circumstances of regional businesses.
- Ensure that real benefits from national competition policy are delivered.
- Ensure equity of services, with transport, communications and infrastructure in the regions being made comparable with those in the capital cities.
- Repeal the Labor government's taxes on mining and carbon given the negative impact on Australian families, jobs, small business, regional communities, superannuation savings, the economy and the international competitiveness of Australian industry.

Education

– access to 21st century learning no matter where you live

A world-class education is the birth right of every Australian and a vital investment in the people, opportunities and prosperity of our nation.

Naturally, parents want to give their children the best possible education. The Nationals believe that from pre-school to university the highest standards and equality of access to lifelong learning is fundamental for all Australians – regardless of where they live.

State and federal governments must work together to meet the nation's education needs. They must avoid duplication in administering programs to ensure resources are focused on classroom needs to deliver equitable education opportunities for all.

Those resources must ensure that teachers have the support and materials they need to do their job.

The Nationals helped to pioneer government funding for independent schools and we continue to support parents' right to educate their children at the school of their choice.

No child should be disadvantaged because of the choice of school or the geographical location of that school. The Nationals will ensure an equitable split of funding between public and private schools regardless of their location.

We also recognise that Australia's geography and demography pose hefty challenges for regional families. While country schools often provide a rich and productive educational experience, particularly in the early years, access to quality education becomes increasingly difficult for secondary and tertiary students from regional areas.

These students are less likely to complete Year 12 than their metropolitan counterparts, and are significantly under-represented in tertiary education. Despite comprising over 30% of Australia's population, only 17% of university students come from regional areas, and regional Australians are much less likely to hold a tertiary qualification.

The Nationals will encourage regional students to complete Year 12, and support them in doing so when they move away from home to higher education.

Once students reach the tertiary level, the current education system does not provide the same opportunities to students from regional areas. The Nationals advocate policy solutions to assist students from regional areas in achieving their full potential, so they can return to regional Australia and apply their acquired skills and knowledge.

The Nationals' approach is to work closely with local school communities, not lock them out, to ensure regional communities remain active participants in the educational outcomes of their young people.

Our Plan

Regional Education Revival

The Nationals' 'Regional Education Revival' will use 21st century tools to provide a 21st century learning experience in regional Australia. We will partner with the states, territories and local communities to transform the delivery of regional education.

The Nationals acknowledge that more needs to be done to address the shortage of skills and labour in the agricultural sector and, in particular, will place agriculture, forestry and horticulture

on the National Skills Needs List which identifies trades and occupations that are considered to have shortages and offers financial incentives to those who pursue these careers and put in place an Agricultural Apprenticeship system to help address the shortage of labour, provide employment opportunities for young people and to keep regional communities alive.

We will identify, train and equip outstanding teachers and use the internet to make them available in every regional classroom.

We will allow school principals to lead, and delegate to them and school councils, funding responsibility and accountability

We will encourage creativity, problem solving and teamwork while retaining a core emphasis on numeracy and literacy. We will provide students with the skill sets that employers need.

Only The Nationals provide the vision and leadership to bring quality education to regional Australia.

Equity in educational opportunity

The core plank of education policy must be that all Australians can access educational opportunities, no matter where they live. Special measures are, therefore, required to enable people living in regional and remote areas to share in that access.

Our Regional Education Fund will ensure that the key issues of equity and access to educational opportunities for regional students are addressed. Under Labor, the gap between regional students and city students has been exacerbated. The Nationals will ensure that barriers to excellence in education are removed for regional students.

Youth allowance

We will reform the Youth Allowance and, in particular, wind back the 2009 federal budget changes that disadvantage regional families.

Labor's changes to the eligibility criteria mean that Independent Youth Allowance is not available to students living in inner regional zones of the ASGC-RA map unless they have worked an average of 30 hours per week for 18 months in a two-year period.

This work test is patently unrealistic given the limited availability of jobs in small regional centres, and the requirement to potentially defer university for two years. We insist that income tests are unreasonable, given the additional costs faced by regional families with children at university.

To address the real costs of living away from home for education, The Nationals propose a new, targeted, rural and regional program to assist regional students who cannot stay at home with their parents while they pursue further study.

A key part of this will be a new tertiary access allowance. All students for whom public transport is not reasonably available within 90 minutes of their place of study, will be eligible for the Tertiary Access Allowance. The new allowance will replace the current relocation allowance and, in most instances, the Independent Youth Allowance. The Tertiary Access Allowance will not be means tested.

Recognising the benefit regional universities provide for both students and local communities, The Nationals will assist universities to establish more residential-hall style accommodation dedicated specifically for use by regional students. The Nationals will seek to implement study support for students studying at regional institutions including the development and implement of an annual low interest loan scheme for students who choose to study at a regional education institution, as part of The Nationals' plan to attract young people to regional areas.

Family reunion travel pass

In recognition of children studying far from home, and to help maintain contact between families, The Nationals support establishing a nation-wide family reunion travel pass, providing free public transport for students returning home for family visits.

Early childhood education

We will also work with the Isolated Children's Parents Association to introduce early childhood programs to ensure all children have access to affordable, high quality early childhood education.

We recognise the contribution home tutors make to children's education, especially in the regions, and will introduce a Home Tutor Allowance in recognition of the role Home Tutors play in delivering distance education to children in remote communities with no financial remuneration for the work they do;

The Nationals will extend the annual Distance Education Allowance (under the Assistance for Isolated Children Scheme) to remote families with pre-school aged children so that they can access early childhood distance education programs

Isolated Children's Allowance

The Nationals will also support an increase to the Assistance for Isolated Children's Allowance, and ensure that it is reviewed on a regular basis so that it can be adapted to changing needs.

School Term Hostels

The Nationals will reintroduce the five-year program for School Term Hostels and provide funding per student for capital works for School Term Hostels. The Nationals further support direct funding through the Priority Country Areas Program to eliminate the burden and delay of State Government bureaucracy.

Improving the education network

Our young people hold the key to the future prosperity of regional Australia. Government support for public and private education is an investment in the future and we need to empower local school communities to develop local solutions to local problems.

Unlike Labor, we have confidence that local school councils can deliver infrastructure projects in a timely and efficient manner and with proper consideration of local factors. This was demonstrated under the previous Coalition Government's 'Investing in Our Schools' program, which delivered more than 20,000 small infrastructure projects in schools.

The Nationals will ensure that local school communities have a direct say in the expenditure of any further funds provided by the federal government for infrastructure improvements.

An Australia-wide curriculum focused on 'the three R's' that includes citizenship education, lifestyle training and health, is essential, and we support performance measures with a view to bringing those schools that are found to be falling behind up to the national standard through financial and/or skills support. This curriculum to include the study of rural communities, their industries and culture in recognition of regional Australia's integral role in Australian culture and prosperity.

National youth safety program

To help provide our young people with other necessary life skills, The Nationals will introduce a national youth safety program to give students basic first aid competencies by Year 10 and to provide all students with a basic introduction to pre-driver education and training.

We will also provide opportunities for young people to receive drug, obesity and general health education.

Speech therapists in regional schools

Recognising the very real problem of lack of access to speech therapists in regional schools, The Nationals will work with state government education ministers and the education sector on the best way to deliver support to students and schools to address this. We will seek to obtain a federal-state agreement to assist in funding the provision of speech therapists in all schools to ensure learning difficulties are detected and addressed early in a child's education; and to consider the opportunities to also address occupational therapy.

Attracting and retaining skilled educators

Attracting and retaining skilled educators in regional Australia is a perennial problem, one exacerbated by the states offering different pay rates to entice teachers to switch between states.

The Nationals support the development of a standardised national system of incentive payments that encourages qualified teachers to relocate to, or remain in, rural and regional locations.

The issue of teacher shortages is significant. Factors contributing to this include isolation from other schools, lack of professional support, lack of coaching mentors, insufficient access to quality learning, lack of housing and low levels of life experiences and skills.

Regional teachers need support to ensure equity is provided and The Nationals will seek to implement a Teacher Relocation Incentive Scheme to address these issues.

A Regional Teacher Network would be established to provide the linkage between teachers and communities in regional areas, designed to ensure teacher relocation is hassle free.

The Nationals' initiative of Rural Teaching Schools is designed to address the lack of skilled educators in the regions and, via a four-year pilot

program, could lead to the creation of a federal government fund to establish permanent Rural Teaching Schools.

In addition, we support bonded scholarships for regional students to study in areas of skills shortage at university – with the proviso that, at the completion of their studies, they agree to return to an area of need for a fixed period of three years.

Regional universities

Regional universities, and the regional campuses of city universities, play a valuable part in improving access to education for students in the regions. The Nationals support policies that encourage and support the universities to deliver services in regional communities.

The educational experience of attending university is more than sitting in lecture theatres. University councils should have the power to include, in setting their fees, an amount to cover a limited range of student services, particularly the sporting and recreational facilities that enhance the university experience.

The Nationals will provide financial resources through a Faculty of Excellence Program for regional universities, to allow them to focus on particular areas of excellence to enhance the university's reputation.

The Nationals will introduce initiatives to assist Australian agriculture and mining schools, as well as universities, to obtain the resources and scientific and professional research skills they need to assist those industries.

We will facilitate collaboration between universities and industry, particularly in the area of agriculture and agribusiness, to ensure a sustainable workforce into the future. The Nationals will also work to establish an Agricultural Research Fund to ensure university research in this area is properly recognised and supported.

Vocational training

The Nationals also believe that a quality education is not dependent on attending university. Many regional students would prefer vocational training and apprenticeships, and regional Australia needs skilled trades people.

We will provide the financial incentives for young people to take up traineeships in the agricultural sector, on the same footing as other traineeships and apprenticeships, and will place tertiary-level agriculture and forestry courses in the National Priorities Category of the Students Contribution Band.

The Nationals will provide incentives for regional employers to give students work experience and gap year employment, to foster local career and job opportunities.

The waste of up to \$5 billion on the school hall program could have paid for hundreds of thousands of apprenticeships. The Nationals will ensure that vocational training receives the attention it deserves to ensure that regional Australia gets the skilled workers it needs.

Students with Special Needs

The Nationals recognise how difficult it can be for families with children with special needs to access education in regional areas, and will provide adequate resources for schools to provide support for these children.

We support a funding model that ties assistance for these students to the student; that is, when students relocate, the funding transfers with them.

The Nationals also support a funding model that treats students with special needs in non-government schools equally, and on the same basis, with children attending government schools.

We support measures to harmonise the treatment of these students across state borders to ensure their families are well supported in seeking the best possible educational outcomes for their children.

HECS bonding

Bonded scholarships have been introduced for medical students to attract new doctors to regional areas, and these schemes have produced positive results.

The Nationals will seek to introduce a scheme to refund the HECS fees of graduates who work in regional areas of need and contribute to the economic development and social fabric of regional Australia.

We also support a review of HECS-HELP debt indexing and the possible application of a cap of 2% per annum.

The Environment

— direct action on climate change and environmental priorities

The Nationals take a practical approach to environmental policy, built on the Party's origins in Australia's rural industries.

Too often ignored, regional Australians live, work and are heavily invested in the natural environment around them. Their lifestyle and the vibrance of their local communities are intrinsically linked to the health and wellbeing of natural resources and sound environmental management.

It makes sense. For example, we recognise that our farmers are, in fact, Australia's frontline environmentalists. They occupy some 60% of Australia's landmass and, as such, many of the environmental icons, ecological communities and endangered species we want to preserve as a broader community, are literally in farmers' backyards.

The Nationals are focused on improving air quality, the sustainability of land, efficient water-use, protection of our unique flora and fauna, and preservation of the marine environment. Getting these right will ensure the prosperity and quality of life for future generations.

A key ingredient is workable partnerships between all levels of government, researchers and natural resource managers.

We know that there is much to learn from those who work our land, water and ocean resources.

Today's food and fibre producers know that the environment in which they operate is different from that faced by their grandparents, and will be different again for their grandchildren. They also know that knowledge is never complete; so there is always a need for continuous improvement and learning.

Successful environmental policy involves integrating responsible environmental

management in all policy decisions. The Nationals' approach to protection of the environment takes account of human and natural activities on our eco systems, quality of life and resource management.

We will not distort international trade or divert new investment to greenhouse emissions havens, but will encourage an orderly transition of the power generating industry to low emissions or carbon storage technology.

We support studies into the use of alternative-based power generation systems, including nuclear energy. We will support practical land and water management, and encourage technologies, such as biofuels, that assist to help maintain clean air.

We will provide protection for our unique flora and fauna and our oceans, while maintaining access for productive use. We will not support Labor's carbon tax, which would have a detrimental impact on the lives of regional Australians and would achieve no effective environmental outcomes.

Our Plan

The Nationals recognise that climate change is an immediate environmental priority and that a robust and realistic policy response is essential. However, climate change can only be successfully addressed in the overall context of environmental, economic and social good.

Those policies should be incentive-driven, not punitive.

Climate change

The Nationals support an effective global program to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and to insure against the risk of climate change. Wealthy industrialised countries like Australia must take a

lead role in implementing a global response if we expect developing countries to contribute to the solution.

Therefore, we support an Australian objective of a 5% reduction in emissions below Year 2000 levels by 2020, with larger reductions dependent on a strong international agreement being reached.

This means that Australia would reduce its emissions of greenhouse gases from 552.7 million tonnes of CO₂-equivalent in 2000 to 525 million tonnes in 2020. The Nationals will ensure that this target is achieved without economic harm or loss of jobs, and by measures that themselves directly benefit Australia.

The Nationals are preoccupied with our communities and workable solutions, not with mindless symbolism. A 'solution' that weakens the Australian economy and creates unemployment helps no-one.

Australia must play its part in addressing climate change issues. The necessary environmental outcomes can be achieved without buying and selling carbon credits and without a carbon tax.

Practical measures can be taken now, including:

- Continuing to develop and use practical CO₂ emissions reduction measures, such as soil carbon sequestration, the revegetation of marginal land, bio-char, clean coal technology, carbon capture and the use of algae.
- Opening a voluntary carbon market to encourage the immediate recognition and involvement of individuals and communities, agriculture and business in sequestration, with bankable offsets.
- Energy-saving initiatives in households, industry and transport to reduce emissions should be supported.
- Incentives should be provided spur demand for more energy-efficient vehicles and the widespread use of alternative fuels.

- Governments should engage the commercial building sector in improving the energy efficiency of city buildings and residential housing.
- Incentives should be provided for the innovative use of renewable energy, without forcing large increases in energy prices.

These measures have the potential to deliver greater reductions in emissions than Labor's carbon tax, without the massive economic cost and job losses.

For example, Professor Ross Garnaut estimated that land restoration works on degraded arid and semi-arid rangelands could by themselves reduce Australian annual emissions by 250 million tonnes of CO₂ – easily meeting the target of 5% reduction in emissions at 2000 levels by 2020.

This would also provide a significant increase in farm income for many land managers.

Upgrading the truck fleet

We will provide incentives to upgrade the Australian truck fleet to meet improved emission standards. We aim to minimise the cost for pre-1995 truck owners and operators to encourage them to switch to more environmentally-friendly trucks.

Natural Resource Management

The Nationals recognise the importance of our natural resources and understand that local communities and individual property owners are often best placed to protect the natural environment. We will directly support catchment management and Landcare organisations.

We will reinstate the funding lost by land and water management groups, such as Catchment Management Authorities (CMAs), due to poor policy decisions by Labor in government.

The current system is clearly flawed, with the government demanding that CMAs apply national

priorities to local projects, even where there is clearly no correlation.

We will work with local CMAs to determine the best outcomes and encourage local groups to determine their own projects within catchment plans. We will implement long-term funding based on local plans within national objectives.

Understanding the importance of Landcare groups to local communities and valuing the 4,000 Landcare groups in Australia, we will reinstate support for the Landcare groups Labor has disendorsed and will restore funding cut by the Labor Government. Indeed, we recognise that almost 40% of farmers were previously involved in Landcare organisations.

We will also restore funding to the 56 Natural Resource Management regions to 2007 levels.

The Nationals will invest in re-plumbing regional Australia, working with farmers and local communities to invest in long-term water-saving infrastructure. We will review legislation to ensure that environmental, socio-economic and resource management considerations are all taken into account under a balanced approach.

We support properly managed, maintained and pest controlled National Parks. The Nationals will establish an Independent Commission through the Council of Australian Governments to instigate an inquiry into:

- The management and expenditure of National Park agencies and the outcomes.
- The productivity of these agencies and outcomes.
- The impact and control of pests, including feral animals, on adjoining properties.

Marine environment

Ever-increasing use of our oceans for commercial and recreation activities means that greater care must be taken to ensure these delicate ecosystems are protected.

So that Australia can respond to threats to the marine environment from pollution from ships, increased tourism, agricultural chemicals, and illegal fishing, The Nationals will ensure that regulatory, research and voluntary organisations are adequately funded and co-ordinated.

This includes strengthening the role of the Marine Environment Protection Association established by the Coalition Government in November 1999.

The Nationals will introduce legislation to make it mandatory for all ships in Australian waters to carry a satellite transponder, so that their position is continually monitored.

Families

— providing dedicated practical support

Australian families are the binding threads in our social fabric. In regional Australia families assume even greater importance as social networks are fewer and people face unique challenges due to their remoteness and difficulty in accessing services readily available in major cities.

While The Nationals unashamedly seek to provide support for the 7,000,000 Australians living outside major population centres, the principles of our policy apply to all Australian families.

We recognise the importance of a balance between work and family and that demographics and geography in Australia mean that regional families are more reliant on support from government and community organisations.

For many people the ideal situation of the family unit comprising two parents – with one as a full-time carer at least until the children reach school age – children and extended family connections through grandparents, provides the best basis for a positive, stable, supported and happy family.

However, this ideal is not always possible and, increasingly, is under threat due to mounting cost-of-living pressures, a scarcity of local employment opportunities and the rapid pace of modern life.

Families where both parents work are increasingly ‘the norm’ and many children live in an environment where their parents are apart. Compared to major cities, children in regional Australia are less likely to be in formal childcare, instead they tend to be at home with parents or cared for under other informal arrangements.

In light of the special circumstances confronting families in regional areas, we will provide priority resources to effective federal linkages with state, territory and local governments, as well

as community groups, to ensure that families in regional Australia have the resources and support services they need.

The lack of soft infrastructure – such as health and allied health services, education resources, childcare and other social institutions – provide added challenges to everyday life in regional communities, and make relocation to the regions by families less attractive.

We consider it incumbent on the federal government to provide more than just money for programs and fund rounds for grants, but to clearly define and provide dedicated regional services to fill social service gaps. This demands a commitment to long-term planning.

Our Plan

Work-life balance

- Ensure those ineligible for paid parental leave are provided for under a new allowance, replacing the baby bonus, which will be paid fortnightly over six months at double the amount. This will benefit single parents and families where one parent stays home.
- Introduce paid maternity, paternity and parental leave, including for the self-employed.
- Provide more childcare places giving priority to the needs of families in regional communities.
- Reinstate funding for the ‘Take a Break’ occasional care program.
- Review childcare funding to provide more flexibility in the provision of service to smaller towns which are discriminated against under the current model.

- Review industrial relations legislation to ensure flexibility and safeguards provide a balance between work and family, thereby, providing mutual benefit to employers, employees and families.
- Eliminate employment practices that discriminate on any basis and, in particular, achieve pay equality between men and women.

Regional support services

- Provide support for families with dependents with special needs, including increased funding for respite care.
- Increase funding for services critical to maintaining the welfare of families in remote areas, in particular, the Royal Flying Doctor Service, mobile health clinics, schools of the air and support for children who have to leave home to continue their education.
- Fund reliable communication and transport infrastructure that enables reasonable access to support services, hospitals and schools to foster and maintain the wellbeing and ongoing support of families.
- Standardise and improve patient travel and accommodation assistance programs across the nation.
- Work with the states, territories, local governments and community groups to identify and meet the needs of families with special circumstances, especially those living in remote indigenous communities, and new arrivals.
- Increase funding for dedicated regional youth programs to seriously address chronic issues like drug and alcohol abuse, bullying and mental health.
- Provide increased funding to the Family Court for regional counselling services.

- Positively respond to changing community dynamics that impact on families, including the importance of family money management and grandparents taking on the role of carers.
- Support the establishment of a National Disability Insurance Scheme.
- Provide funding to reinstate the National Community Crime Prevention Program.

Recognising the role of seniors

In addition to The Nationals' *Seniors* section later in this policy platform, we recognise the role and contribution senior Australians, especially as grandparents, play in supporting modern families.

It is important for families to have the option of staying together wherever possible. This can be particularly difficult in regional areas, particularly where older parents and older grandparents are involved, and appropriate aged care facilities are often far from the family unit.

We will provide funding, and work with all levels of government and community groups, to increase the number of dedicated aged care facilities and places in regional areas.

Carers

As a nation, we are overdue for affording due recognition and support of the role of carers in our society, and their importance to the family unit.

Carers are a community asset and deserve to be valued as such. They provide support for partners, children and grandchildren, as well as friends. They deliver for families and for the community as a whole.

In government, The Nationals will:

- Commit to fully recognising the role of carers, whatever their age and the age of the person receiving care. For carers who leave the workplace to provide care, we will seek the provision of superannuation payments over and above existing carer allowances.

- Introduce new and more responsive models of respite to assist carers, to help ensure the maintenance of care services.

The Nationals recognise that grandparents are increasingly required to assume a greater role in supporting grandchildren, which, while done gladly and with love, places an emotional and financial strain on them.

The role of grandparents in this situation must be better supported, and The Nationals will:

- Develop grandparent liaison officers within Centrelink to assist grandparents in navigating the system.
- Provide emergency or discretionary payments to grandparents where children are placed in their care at short notice.

In a society that is increasingly time poor, too often we fail to treasure our older citizens in the way they deserve and this does pose increased risk of social isolation with adverse consequences for the physical and mental health of older Australians.

The Nationals will:

- Support community initiatives to prevent the rise in social isolation.
- Develop pilot programs that encourage government, business and community groups to commit to engaging with older Australians, where individuals and workers are encouraged to initiate and maintain contact with the lonely and isolated.
- Support community-based mentoring programs to allow older Australians to engage with and provide a positive role model for younger people.

While ageism can be a community problem, The Nationals believe government has a role to play in leading and helping to shift community attitudes.

We will:

- Ensure that age discrimination legislation and regulatory mechanisms are enshrined and resourced in the same manner as other anti-discrimination measures.
- Review all Commonwealth legislation and act to remove any remaining provisions that treat people unfairly because of their age.

Food Security

— feeding a nation and a booming world population

The world has entered an era of food scarcity. Global demand for food continues to rise, yet water and available land for food production are diminishing.

Seldom before have the issues facing agriculture been so closely aligned with the issues of the nation and, indeed, those of the global community. Issues such as:

- World population growth,
- The threat of a changing climate, and
- The debates that lie behind these – food production versus the environment, food production versus urban encroachment and food production versus mining.

Global population is projected to explode from 6.2 billion people today to over 9 billion by 2050 – an increase of some 50%. In Australia we are on a similar trajectory, with our 22 million today growing to at least 36 million over the same period.

The United Nations says that world food production will need to increase by 70% over the next 40 years just to keep pace with population growth. To put that food need in perspective, that increase represents more food than has been produced over the entire course of human history.

There is little scope to increase the area of arable land and, in fact, arable land and water are under threat from population growth and over-utilisation.

In Asia projected population growth will see over half of the world's people living within our region. This is also the region with the fastest rate of economic growth, so, in addition to more mouths to feed, there is already a shift in consumption patterns in a segment of the market where personal incomes are rising, putting more pressure on food supply.

All of this has important implications for Australia and, in turn, has economic, environmental and social implications for our farmers and our supply chains in what they produce and how they produce it.

Metropolitan areas now use up to half the water once available to cultivate food, ground water levels are declining, access to good farm land is flagging because of a decline in soil fertility, and there are constraints on opening new areas for cultivation.

Australia, as one of the most active producers and exporters of food, needs to think more strategically about its food supply. Securing our food supply is intrinsically linked to Australia's national and economic security, where more crop per drop, or producing more food from fewer natural resources, is the new mantra.

While there are clearly challenges, there are also opportunities. Australia is an internationally renowned producer of high quality, reliable and sustainable food. Our farmers are world leaders.

Our Plan

Making agriculture a priority

In addition to the *Primary Production* section of this policy platform, government policy must reflect the importance of food production.

The Australian Government Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry has been in steady decline and, in recent years, has been allowed to lapse into a shell portfolio.

This, along with a dramatic decline in agricultural research and development, has seen Australia trail behind many developing countries in terms of our research effort.

Federal Labor's cuts to agricultural research spending, eliminating the majority of Cooperative Research Centres and the abolition of Land and Water Australia have been extremely short-sighted given the challenges we face.

Ironically, over this same period, Labor provided research and development fund for agriculture in other countries to the tune of \$464 million. That investment should have been injected into innovation in Australian food production, driving productivity gains here first, then sharing intellectual property with nations in need.

The Nationals will bolster the existing Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry portfolio and expand it to include a new responsibility for Food Security. The Minister responsible will ensure that the importance of food security to Australia is recognised in government decision-making. A sound Strategic Plan, that it recognises the right to farm and includes measures to manage the spread of population growth, including the protection of prime agricultural land from urban encroachment for Australia's food security benefits regional communities and all Australians. Our policies assist farmers to 'think smarter' about production and will foster a strong commitment to agricultural research which, in turn, will ensure food security.

Feeding our nation and fulfilling our trade obligations is a fundamental challenge to be addressed. The Nationals will act now to provide the nation with a renewed focus in policy direction and maintain a crucial national advantage that we have too long taken for granted... the nation's food security.

Agricultural research and development is also a sound investment. A study by the Council of Rural Research and Development Corporations found agricultural research and development in Australia deliver returns – at an astounding rate of \$11 to every \$1 invested, making it a prudent and appropriate strategy for driving growth in the Australian economy.

Today, Australian agriculture remains a mainstay of the national economy.

- Through chain, Australian farms generate \$155 billion-a-year in production – just over 12% of Australia's Gross Domestic Product.
- Australian farms directly employ around 320,000 people, with approximately 1.6 million Australian jobs economy-wide dependent on the farm sector.
- Our agricultural exports are worth \$32 billion-a-year to the national economy.
- While 60% of everything our farms produce is exported, the 40% that stays in Australia forms the basis of the daily intake of the Australian population.
- Farmers occupy a staggering 60% of the Australian landmass and, given over 94% are proactive in natural resource management, they represent Australia's frontline in this nation's environmental and sustainability effort.

Positioning Australia as a global leader in agricultural sciences, with a view to boosting production and productivity in this age of food scarcity, must be a strategic priority in becoming a major supplier of choice to an ever-hungrier world.

Food industry

Beyond the farm-gate, the food industry is the nation's largest manufacturing sector and employs more than 200,000 Australians, half of whom reside in regional areas. The Nationals maintain that the food manufacturing, retail and food services industries are an increasingly important part of the economic fabric of the Australian economy.

There must be a holistic policy approach to ensuring Australia's food security. In government, The Nationals will:

- Increase investment in agricultural research and development.

- Foster closer ties between the farming and scientific communities.
- Develop sustainable strategies to enhance food production and productivity.
- Provide regional communities reliant on the farming economy with the necessary infrastructure and support to assist farming, horticulture and related industries – both now and in adapting to future changes in domestic and global market circumstances.
- Implement programs and educate the general public about planning necessary to ensure food supply into the future.
- Actively pursue policies to ensure that Australia and other nations have access to fair markets, price stabilisation and healthy food.
- Develop and implement a Strategic Plan for Food Security for rest of the 21st Century.
- Decentralise food distribution networks and enable more efficient transportation of food.

Implement clear and mandatory labelling regulations that provide consumers with transparent information about the true origin of food products, as well as the nature of the manufacturing process while ensuring that the industry is able to continue to improve its product without being unfairly hindered by new labelling laws and health traffic light system warnings on the labelling that will confuse and misinform the public.

Property Security

Food security begins with property security. State Labor governments have an abysmal record in respecting property rights and compensating those whose rights are compromised or restricted by government action.

The Nationals in government will work through the Council of Australian Governments to secure investment certainty for landholders through property rights in land, vegetation and

water. Should the states resist, The Nationals will consider what legislative measures may be available at the Commonwealth level to secure and protect land values.

Biosecurity

Australia's pest- and disease-free status is vital for our farming sector, both in production and marketing terms, but also the national economy and food security.

Fundamental to our enviable international position is a robust, efficient, science-based quarantine and biosecurity regime – confidence in which has been rocked over recent years.

Transparent, science-based quarantine and biosecurity measures to protect Australia's environment, biodiversity and agricultural systems assume even greater importance in this modern era of global movement of people, animals and goods.

Food imports make up an increasing share of Australian diets because consumers demand greater choice and availability all-year round, regardless of domestic seasonality. The Nationals' concern is to ensure that food and produce entering our country meets our quarantine and food safety requirements.

We will not jeopardise this nation's reputation for clean, fresh, pest- and disease-free food, and will ensure that our quarantine services are properly resourced to protect Australia's production and marketing position. As part of this process we will reassess the cost burden on primary production under Biosecurity Australia and the Australia Quarantine Inspection Service in light of Australia's international trade obligations and the wider community benefits.

The Nationals note the increasing imports of food to Australia and shortages that may occur due to national disasters and, in government, will ensure that:

- The same food safety standards and trace-back systems are applied to imported food that are applied to Australian grown and produced food.
- Risk assessments for new imports are backed up by sound science.
- Imports are only cleared for entry after thorough scientific analysis and consultation with affected industries.
- Any decisions made under the Labor government where the risk assessments are of concern are quickly re-assessed to determine if the science is in fact sound.

Security of supply

It is a sign of the deepening world food shortage in the face of massive population growth that most

developed countries have adopted 'security of supply' policies to ensure adequate fuel and food is available in the case of a natural disasters or act of aggression.

While few and far between, pandemics, major terrorist attacks or severe climatic events can have profound impact on communities and food supplies, so it is prudent in this modern age to have effective plans at the ready to mitigate against risks.

The Nationals will introduce policies to ensure Australia is able to meet its food requirements by adopting practical measures to protect the supply chain, such as decentralised food distribution hubs, and secure alternative road and rail networks.

These measures will support the health and safety measures necessary to meet a national environmental or security emergency.

Indigenous Australians

— taking their rightful place in the Australian community

Like all Australian citizens, Indigenous Australians are entitled to self-determination and to pursue economic prosperity and social cohesion free from constraints and without prejudice.

To enable Indigenous Australians to take responsibility for themselves and their families, The Nationals consider that properly allocated resources must address disadvantage, while respecting the special and unique contribution Indigenous Australians make to our national identity.

We believe that the Australia Constitution should make reference to Indigenous Australians and we encourage public discussion on changing the preamble to reflect the importance of the place Indigenous Australians hold in our nation. This change should be put formally to the Australian people in a referendum at the 2013 election.

The Nationals stand with Indigenous leaders in seeking an economic future for Indigenous people. Individuals should be able to get on with their lives and businesses without arbitrary intervention by government. For example, in the case of the wild rivers in Cape York, Queensland, we do not believe in taking away the capacity to make a living and support one's family. We believe Indigenous leaders, with support from government, should retain control of their assets and use them for economic benefit and cultural support.

Audit of state and territory Indigenous expenditure

Widespread anecdotal evidence indicates that federal funds have not been fully applied for correct purposes, and many Indigenous people have not received the assistance intended, entrenching the misery of vulnerable Australians who deserve better.

The Nationals will mount an independent national inquiry by the Productivity Commission into the way funds have been applied to Indigenous programs and whether they have been spent for the stated purposes. It will seek to ensure national funding structures and funds allocated for Indigenous Australia are effectively delivered.

Federal takeover of Indigenous remote services delivery

Services to Indigenous Australians should be, at least, broadly consistent with those to other Australians in similar circumstances. The Nationals support full federal control of the remote segment of Indigenous services and programs, to improve coordination and increase transparency in spending.

The Nationals in government will place responsibility for coordinating remote Indigenous services within the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet to monitor and fast-track policy initiatives

We will also see that Indigenous policy priorities become an essential component in other mainstream federal policies, programs and services. Biannual reporting to the Prime Minister and Parliament on progress will ensure that setbacks are addressed in a timely manner.

The accountability of Departmental Secretaries and other key staff will be heightened so that Indigenous policy is taken seriously and undertaken conscientiously.

The role of COAG

Since 2007, Labor has held numerous Council of Australian Government meetings with the states and the territories on Indigenous disadvantage.

Hundreds of pages, large sums of money and many pledges of good intentions have not resulted in any significant advancement.

There remains disagreement on how to measure progress and how to identify what progress has actually been made.

The Nationals will ensure proper arrangements are in place for identifying the success or failure of programs and services emanating from COAG. Only then can successes be built upon and failures corrected and redirected.

Better mainstream services for Indigenous Australians

Many success stories have seen Indigenous Australians gain access to the same services as others in society, establish long-term employment and conduct happy family lives. They need nothing from government.

However, in many cases, much-needed services are not user-friendly to the needs of Indigenous people. Too often bureaucrats sidestep this issue. It needs much deeper consideration.

The Nationals will review the way service delivery organisations interact with Indigenous customers, to ensure their appropriateness and move services into mainstream delivery and away from multiple specific Indigenous assistance programs.

Improving governance in Indigenous organisations

Many outstanding Indigenous organisations have proven their capacity to manage business arrangements at the highest level. Others are marked by irregular and inappropriate business practices.

The Nationals consider Indigenous disadvantage too important to allow sharp or corrupt practices to divert much-needed funding, programs and services. We oppose and will stamp out this culture of malpractice.

The Nationals in government will provide support to enable Indigenous organisations to meet compliance obligations. For example, registration with the Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Organisations (ORIC) will be mandatory.

Development of Native Title

Under Labor, Native Title is convoluted and uncertain. Its application of Native Title has resulted in frustration and conflict.

The Nationals support the calls by respected figures, such as Noel Pearson, who make a persuasive case for closer examination of the way that Native Title currently operates. Our goal is to reach a new understanding on Native Title, so that government can put in place a fairer system.

Strengthening awareness of Indigenous history and culture

An awareness of personal Indigenous history and culture is an essential element in becoming a full participant in the Australian community. The Nationals will expand the role of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) to enhance this knowledge base.

The Nationals support a redirection of funds from the Land Councils and other Native Title bodies currently responsible for compiling and storing this information. We will centralise this activity, providing better coordination of records for academic and research purposes, while securing other secret and sensitive materials.

The Nationals support the insertion of materials into curricula that highlights the positive contributions Indigenous Australians have made to our society. The Nationals believe that Indigenous culture and history should be included across the social sciences and taught responsibly and accurately.

Indigenous housing

Indigenous Australians have the same right to quality housing as other Australians.

Progress in re-housing residents of the appalling town camps in Alice Springs is too slow. Housing is also desperately needed by Indigenous Australians in other remote locations.

The Nationals maintain that adequate Indigenous housing and infrastructure is the foundation for increasing self-respect and social cohesion.

These lead to improvements in living standards, health and education. They are high priorities for an incoming federal government.

The Nationals support the goal of personal home ownership for all Australians and Indigenous Australians are no exception.

Better Indigenous health

The poor health and wellbeing of Indigenous Australians is a major concern and a national priority, with general health and life expectancy lagging substantially behind the Australian average.

Throwing more money at the issues is not the answer. The Nationals will implement policies to:

- Provide targeted funding for healthcare and hygiene education.
- Introduce priority programs to support educational courses for Indigenous students, informing them on health, hygiene, and physical and mental wellbeing.
- Provide incentives for tertiary-educated Indigenous Australians to return to, or otherwise support, the communities most in need of their assistance;
- Provide appropriate resources to tackle drug and alcohol problems with programs that encourage and promote heightened self-esteem, work participation and education.

The Nationals believe that priority, adequate funding and resources must be given to the following areas:

- Reducing smoking.
- Eliminating rheumatic heart disease.
- Tackling diabetes.
- Improving dental care.
- Boosting mental health.
- Recognising the Indigenous medical workforce.
- Recruiting more Aboriginal health workers.
- Creating better access to Opal unsniffable fuel.
- Prosecuting drug users, dealers and bootleggers.
- Regulating alcohol.
- Introducing social clubs.
- Improving Indigenous aged care.
- Supporting Aboriginal Medical Services, including MBS Item Loading for Remote Area Medical Services, and creating an Indigenous Medical Workforce Agency.

Extension of welfare quarantining and the Family Responsibility Commission

The Nationals support welfare quarantining, as a guarantee that family budgets are spent on essentials, such as food, clothing and medicines, and not on alcohol, gambling or drugs.

Based on the positive results experienced in the Northern Territory and Cape York, there is a compelling case for welfare quarantining to be extended nationwide, starting with NSW and Western Australia.

The Nationals do not accept that individual freedom of action includes the right to neglect or abuse one's children. No Australian should

go hungry, live in unsafe situations or suffer deprivation, as do too many Indigenous children. Extended welfare quarantining will help win this battle over neglect.

Improved law and order

The Nationals assert that Indigenous Australians living in remote communities have the same basic right to live in a civil and safe society free from fear and violence. No Indigenous community should lack the policing to maintain civil and safe daily life. We support permanent policing, where warranted, and will provide the necessary resources to ensure law and order.

The Nationals believe that, with targeted programs and human resources, the cycle of crime among young Indigenous people can be broken, and that they can become accountable for their actions. Rigorous custodial based work programs will benefit these communities.

Indigenous victims of crime also deserve assistance to overcome the immediate and long-term impacts of crimes committed against them. Victims need to access counselling and assistance, arising from an expanded role of Aboriginal Medical Services in the area of mental health.

Education and youth

Indigenous parents want education for their children. They recognise education is the stepping stone to a successful life. Schools must celebrate the presence and contribution of Indigenous students.

At present, a heroic few teachers struggle in a demoralising and under- resourced environment. The states and territories are far from delivering adequate educational services, and a federal takeover may be the answer.

The Nationals will investigate this possibility. We will also investigate the adequacy of secondary

schooling arrangements for Indigenous children in remote locations.

Indigenous economic development

The Nationals maintain that economic development is a realistic and achievable goal for Indigenous Australians and essential for long-term employment. Indigenous Australians often access or control substantial assets, but do not always have the capacity or the resources to develop them to full benefit.

This is particularly true of tourism in Indigenous communities, which benefits the visitors and the Indigenous communities economically and socially.

We will abolish the permit system currently required to travel on roads into communities or to access community land or facilities in the Northern Territory. The permit system should, however, be retained for entry to all other Aboriginal lands.

More needs to be done to identify and encourage economic development opportunities in remote Australia. To this end, The Nationals propose consideration of a special taxation regime for investment in any remote community where the population is sufficient to provide the workforce for any potential business or commercial project there.

This taxation arrangement would allow an accelerated depreciation schedule for capital investment.

Taxation zones would not be specifically defined. Nor would accelerated depreciation concessions be automatically available, but would be granted subject to application and on an individual project basis, to encourage private sector investment and economic development.

Primary Production

— reaping what we sow in regional Australia

Australia's farmers, fishers and foresters are among the most efficient and sustainable in the world, producing clean, green, high quality, reliable, safe and environmentally-friendly food, fibre and timber – each, in their own right, the envy of the world.

Productivity gains, driven by research and development, have enabled Australian producers to stay ahead of our international competitors. For example, over the 30 years from 1974 to 2004, Australian farms consistently achieved leading average multifactor productivity growth of 2.8% per year.

Maintaining that competitive edge is a constant battle and getting harder. The alarming decline in agricultural research and development sees Australia being outstripped dollar-for-dollar by many developing countries in terms of our research effort.

Meanwhile, federal Labor's cuts to agricultural research spending, eliminating the majority of Cooperative Research Centers and the abolition of Land and Water Australia have been extremely short-sighted given the challenges we face.

Ironically, over this same period, Labor provided research and development funds for agriculture in other countries to the tune of \$464 million.

That investment should have been injected into innovation in Australian food production, driving productivity gains here, before sharing intellectual property with others.

In Australia, on current funding levels, and without a resolute vision, the days of cutting-edge farm production are numbered with the already declining trend in productivity growth in many parts of agricultural activity now becoming common.

Research is not 'just another line item' in the federal budget to be cut, it represents the future. Evidence and experience shows that it takes 30 to 40 years to bring embryonic research ideas to a point where 95% of the country has adopted and applied the research.¹

Eroding funding for agricultural research and development reduces Australia's capability to contribute to global food production, reduces Australia's national science capacity and exacerbates the global food security problems of tomorrow.

Australia is one of the world's most important food and fibre producing nations, and we can increase our productivity significantly – as long we have the right policy framework.

The Nationals asset that Australians must be more than just self-sufficient in food, we have the capacity to make a valuable contribution in helping to feed the world's rapidly expanding population.

Population pressure is placing increasing demands on global food and fibre and production. Many of the world's traditional food and fibre producing areas face issues such as urban spread, desertification and declining water resources, resulting in fewer areas available for food and fibre production.

Food and water security are already becoming the defining issues of the 21st century, and food producers are coming under enormous pressure to increase productivity while using fewer natural resources.

Feeding our nation and fulfilling our trade obligations are fundamental government priorities. The Nationals are committed to driving a new policy direction for the nation in primary production.

Our Plan

In a world under growing population pressure and facing a changing climate, our primary producers are more important than ever to the nation's survival, opportunities and prosperity.

Food and fibre production and water availability are key drivers in shaping international policy for this century. The Nationals' practical approach to primary production needs and issues are designed to position Australia as an increasingly important player in the world economy.

Recognising producers

People in regional Australia often speak of the increasing 'disconnect' between the realities, challenges and rewards of primary production and the perception among urban dwellers of regional life.

This perceived lack of understanding in the cities, where policies are developed, results in unrealistic policies, particularly on environmental matters, which are then imposed on primary producers.

The Nationals maintain that the vital role primary producers play in the economic and social fabric of the nation should be formally recognised in a major government policy statement.

We will audit all environmental legislation at local, state and federal level, with a view to streamlining regulations and removing unworkable 'green tape' so that food production can be expanded wherever appropriate.

Australians also need to be better informed about, and have access to, information as to the basic costs of producing food and fibre, especially the factors influencing prices, and the very real benefits to consumers of choosing Australian produce. We will strengthen 'truth in labelling laws' to help buyers make informed purchasing decisions and we will support the Australian food industry in its endeavours to create more

innovative and healthier products for consumers and in particular that the industry be allowed to continue to improve its product without being unfairly hindered by new labelling laws and health traffic light system warnings on the labelling that will confuse and misinform the public.

The Nationals will continue to support regional forestry agreements, as instruments that provide resource security, best practice land-use, and sustainability.

Foreign investment – agricultural land, water and food processing

The Nationals condemns the Federal Government for overseeing a 26 times increase in foreign investment in Australia's agricultural sector since 2007 and will tighten the Foreign Investment Review Board's guidelines to ensure that all significant foreign investments in agricultural land, water licenses and food processing assets can be rejected if a review finds that they are against the national interest.

We will set up a public register of foreign acquisitions by individuals or companies or governments of (a) substantial land areas and (b) water rights in this country to be co-ordinated by the Foreign Investment Review Board.

Use of agricultural land

Mining, agriculture and tourism are Australia's key industries. Forestry is an important import-replacing industry, with our trade deficit in forest products running at about \$2 billion-a -year. Generally our primary industries co-exist peacefully and, in the main, the infrastructure developed for one provides benefits for the others.

In recent years, however, conflict has arisen about mining access to agricultural land, in particular to prime agricultural land, as well as in respective claims of forestry and agriculture in high rainfall areas.

State Labor governments, especially in Queensland and New South Wales, have sold-off mining and exploration rights, granting land-use priority over agriculture.

In the case of forestry, taxation incentives provided through managed investment schemes gave forestry (and some horticulture schemes) an unfair tax advantage over traditional farming operations and distorted investment and markets.

Forestry now occupies only 0.4% of Australia's farmland, but this could rise to 6.2% by 2020 under the Labor-Greens-Independents' carbon tax regime, which skews land-use.

These conflicts create risks for Australia's long-term food security, water management, social and physical environment, and threaten Australia's biodiversity. Unless addressed now, these pressures will escalate.

While land-use is predominantly (and constitutionally) a matter for the states, The Nationals insist that there is a federal responsibility to develop national solutions in consultation with the states and territories that deal fairly with all parties.

In government, The Nationals will:

- Re-establish a pre-eminent land and water research body. Charge this body with establishing, in consultation with the states and farming and forestry organisations, a national definition of 'prime agricultural land', based on such factors as moisture availability, temperature regime, chemical balance, permeability, surface composition, soil type, susceptibility to flooding, and erosion characteristics, and closeness to urban centres, markets and processing facilities.
- Fund the identification of prime agricultural land, working through the Bureau of Rural Services.
- While recognising the limits of the federal government's constitutional powers, limit, and

where appropriate, prevent surface mining and coal seam gas extraction on prime agricultural land. Underground mining and coal seam gas extraction will be permitted only where it can be shown conclusively that the hydrological balance is not affected, groundwater will not be polluted, and significant surface impacts will not occur.

- Ensure that farmers and their surrounding communities are fairly compensated when mineral or gas development is allowed on their land.
- Require that all agricultural land subject to surface mining be rehabilitated to the approximate original contours, and to its original or better productivity.
- Establish a Working Party; including representatives of the mining, forestry, catchment management and farming industries; to further define these conditions and progress their implementation.
- In conjunction with the farming and forestry industries, identify criteria for lands where broad scale forestry ought to be encouraged and include these criteria in catchment management plans.
- Develop equivalent and non-discriminatory incentives that do not artificially distort markets for investment in agricultural and forestry activities, in consultation with those industries.
- Abolish tax deductability for passive investors in management investment schemes.

Murray-Darling Basin

The Murray-Darling Basin is the nation's greatest food producing resource, accounting for almost 40% of all food in Australia, and is home to 2,000,000 people. The communities in the Basin are under increasing pressure and constant threat, not only from droughts and a drier climate, but from government policies.

Particularly ill-advised is the Labor Government's \$4 billion ad hoc water buy-back venture.

The Nationals will insist socio-economic impact statements before any more water is bought within the Basin. The Australian Government Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry will be consulted prior to any purchase and the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics will undertake an assessment of the impacts of any buy-backs.

The focus of Murray-Darling Basin policy must be the funding of infrastructure efficiencies, both in-system and on-farm, with water entitlement buy-backs used only as a last resort. We must ensure that more water is returned to the environment, enable farmers to produce more food and fibre using less water, while protecting the environment, communities and regional economies.

Opening northern Australia

We will actively encourage the growth of agriculture in northern Australia as a potential new food bowl. With predictions that the climate will become drier in southern Australia and wetter in the north, developing its food producing potential is a must.

The Nationals will drive a federal, state and territory partnership to secure sustainable agriculture development in the north as a nation-building priority, and resolve the environmental and Indigenous policy issues that currently limit the development of northern Australia.

The Nationals will commission a major independent study to examine the social, economic and environmental viability of making better use of water in the north, and will renew investigations into the practicality of transporting water southward.

Natural disasters

The Nationals maintain that some droughts, fires and floods are truly exceptional, and no land manager can be fully prepared for them. Our overriding objective is to enable primary producers to return to full production as quickly as possible.

We will continue to support farmers with targeted assistance during a one-in-25-year drought, major flood or fire. We will to remove the \$500,000 upper cap on interest rate subsidies over five years.

The Nationals will also invest in practical on-ground preparedness, including, where appropriate, flood and fire mitigation, and will boost research and development on new plant varieties and management practices to increase farm productivity.

We will review the Australian Plague Locust Commission to ensure that its funding and governance are adequate to deal with rapidly emerging threats.

Research and development

In addition to the initiatives denoted under the Food Security section of this policy document, Australia's primary producers confront myriad challenges, include climate variability; local and exotic pests, weeds and diseases; increasing consumer demand for fresher, tastier, more sustainable and cheaper food; and increasingly expensive inputs, such as water, fuel, fertilisers, chemicals, labour and energy.

The Nationals recognise the importance of research into climate variability, founded on scientific merit. We will focus on those research projects with the potential to revolutionise agriculture, fisheries or forestry production.

For example, we will accelerate research into perennial cereal crops, particularly wheat, which

are disease resistant, high yielding, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, are water efficient/drought resistant, and can produce high protein grain.

Further, The Nationals will support the efforts by the Australian Wool Industry and others in establishing an orderly phasing out of surgical mulesing and development of a viable alternate practice for the prevention of breech strike in sheep.

The agricultural sector has the best take up rate of new technologies and production systems of any of Australia's industries. We will establish an Agricultural Research Fund for universities to encourage innovative new research in the fields of agricultural science, food security and food production and establish programs to commercialise research project outcomes.

The Nationals will continue to support the Cooperative Research Centres and the Rural Research and Development Corporations.

Primary production is one of the very few sectors where commodity groups contribute significant resources through transactional levies towards research and development for their sector.

We recognise and value this investment and will continue to match it, at least, dollar-for-dollar.

Collective export marketing

Where producers want collective export marketing, The Nationals will continue to provide support to establish a fair system in order to maximise grower returns.

Alcohol taxation

The Nationals will not support a volumetric tax on wine, or any changes to the Wine Equalisation Tax that disadvantages the Australian wine industry.

Regional Development

— revitalising and populating regional Australia

Too often taken for granted, the regions beyond Australia's major population centres remain the economic engine room of this country, generating the overwhelming lion's share of our exports.

Unashamedly, we believe and expect that with much of Australia's real wealth generated in the regions it is only fitting that a fairer share of the revenue it creates is returned to the regions.

To that end, at the 2010 federal election, The Nationals, along with our Coalition partners, committed to a \$1 billion funding guarantee, dedicated to the regions. This principle has been implemented in new state Coalition governments in Western Australia, New South Wales and Victoria.

But it's more than just a fair share principle. We've taken that idea and expanded on it. This new investment must be more than just funding programs or bricks and mortar – it must also focus on building human capital in our regions.

As a nation, we are overdue in recognising the role regional areas can, and must, play in overcoming Australia's national challenges. While our major cities struggle under growing population pressures, our regions cry out for more people, services, infrastructure, businesses and employees.

It's time to correct that imbalance.

Australia's concentration of population is the highest in the OECD, and is almost double the OECD average. A staggering 88% of our population is packed into just 3% of the landmass, mainly small coastal recesses in Sydney and Newcastle, Melbourne, Brisbane and the Queensland's east coast, Adelaide and Perth.

We need to seriously address this population squeeze and pull the policy levers that can re-energize and build the under-developed 97% of

Australia that is regional. That's where the real untapped growth potential lies.

But it's also a tonic for Australia's city population ills – a proactive solution to our congested cities, bursting under a national population of just 22 million people.

Unless we, as a nation, can bring businesses and people to major regional cities and develop new commercial centres, 36 million people by 2050 will grind our cities into perpetual gridlock.

This anomaly creates challenges for regional Australia and demands a special role for government policy in ensuring that regions outside the major cities continue to prosper and grow. Creating dynamic, stable, secure and viable regional economies is essential for Australia's future.

Our Plan

The Nationals will ensure that government do not hinder the development of prosperous regional communities, but actually promote and incentivise it.

Government cannot redress uneven growth across regions, or solve the uncertainties of international markets. But the regions have the capacity for much better economic performance, and The Nationals' practical support for regional economies will help to make them more competitive.

The Nationals' commitment to take real action on sustainable population growth will ensure regional Australia benefits from a targeted skill migration and regional Australia settlement program.

The Nationals have a proud record of achieving results in regional development. This policy builds

on our past achievements and sets a bold new direction for supporting regional development. Its key themes are:

- Recognition of the need for non-negotiable provision of best practice services and infrastructure for regions.
- Decentralisation of decision-making for regional planning.
- Support for innovation in the regions.
- Better funding models to enable regions to achieve their vision.

Our policy promotes the provision of adequate services and first-class infrastructure for all regions. It places far greater emphasis on regional innovation and entrepreneurship as the key drivers of successful regional development. It will create new opportunities for region-wide, bottom-up economic development.

The Nationals recognise the limits of any government's capacity to control all the forces that drive regional outcomes. We realise that the regions themselves must take responsibility for development strategies. We understand that regional development institutions must be properly resourced and given the freedom to make their own decisions.

The Nationals will encourage regions to drive their own futures through new, bold and highly innovative funding mechanisms and governance frameworks to deliver a better and more prosperous future for regional Australia.

Regional policy challenge

Regional communities face problems neither they, nor government, can directly control. Some are seasonal, such as drought or flood; some are ongoing structural challenges such as the ageing of the non-metropolitan population and the loss of young people to the major cities; some are unavoidable, such as unstable or corrupt international markets.

Many regions outside the capital cities have a relatively narrow economic base and lack the scale and resilience of cities, making them more open to sudden economic shocks, and to the gradual erosion of their skills base.

The Nationals support regions in addressing the problems they can influence, and in limiting the adverse effects of those beyond their control. Non-metropolitan regions have an ageing population. Their best and brightest young people often leave for the city, and many do not return.

Migrants from the city or other countries do not typically settle in the regions most in need of new blood and new ideas. The regions that benefit from the influx are generally on the coast or within a couple of hours of the city. Regions further away miss out.

Many regions traditionally reliant on agriculture have found that structure is changing. As new industries and enterprises emerge, regional economies must diversify to ensure their future. Those furthest away from the capital cities require support to compete for population and industry growth, and to respond to new challenges.

Dozens of regional development programs across the nation, delivered by the three levels of government with little overall coordination, direction or evaluation, compete for regional support.

In addition to the 'tax incentives', 'regional relocation' and 'bonded migration' measures outlined under *The Economy and Taxation* section of this policy platform, The Nationals will make a fair share commitment to specifically lock in growing federal funding for regional Australia in a coordinated partnership with state and local governments.

Regional policy solutions

Though fundamentally important, the provision of basic services is not alone enough to ensure regional economies prosper and grow.

Regional growth derives from entrepreneurship, knowledge, networks and innovation. Simply encouraging new industries from outside the region to set up shop is no longer enough. Genuine regional development occurs when communities leverage their assets to achieve new economic opportunities.

This requires dynamic leadership, openness to new ideas and a can-do attitude in the community. Innovation and entrepreneurship are central elements of successful regional economies, and communities and regions need to be encouraged by government to embrace innovation.

This means more effective support for small business, the engine room of regional economies.

Regional education

The Nationals will encourage regional universities to work with TAFE colleges to engage more with young people, and so help produce the next generation of entrepreneurs. To encourage graduates to work in regional Australia, we will provide a partial reduction in their HECS obligation, based on the length of time they spend there and the degree of remoteness.

Regional leadership

Key decisions about strategy and projects must be made by the leaders within each region, not by central governments. Local communities must take a greater role in deciding the projects that will lead to economic and social benefits for their area.

This is a hallmark of The Nationals' Royalties for Regions policy in Western Australia, the Regional Growth Fund in Victoria and the Restart NSW Fund.

Achieving better regional policy outcomes for Australia will require a better funding mechanism for regional projects, and support for better

focused regional institutions where leaders are encouraged to be strategic and visionary.

Good Local Government is the key to sound regional leadership and to the success of regional development programs including infrastructure. Therefore, The Nationals support the constitutional recognition of local government so as to ensure that the Federal Government can continue to make direct payments to local governments through regional programs such as Roads to Recovery.

Regional skills

To help alleviate the skills shortage in regional Australia, new arrivals will be encouraged to settle in regional and rural areas. Temporary business visas (457s) will be made more accessible to business in regional areas with proven skills shortage needs.

The Nationals' policy approach will build regional economic capacity by encouraging all the regions to be more innovative and to set their own directions for economic development strategy, with strong support from the Australian Government.

Regional infrastructure

Under Labor governments, federal and state, country hospitals have been closed or downgraded, schools and public buildings neglected, infrastructure left to run down, and services withdrawn.

Good infrastructure – whether it be roads, rail, telecommunications, schools, hospitals, bridges, dams or airports – is a vital key to truly unlock regional Australia's potential.

But we also acknowledge that the lack of soft infrastructure – such as health and allied health services, education resources, childcare and other social institutions – are barriers to regional relocation

The obligation of the federal government on these issues is more than money and a clearly defined regional component is essential. It demands a commitment to long-term planning.

Infrastructure Australia was created to deliver a key part of this integrated approach. But little has manifested since its inception in 2008. We will make it happen.

The Nationals will ensure that a fair share of federal government funding for infrastructure and services is allocated to regional areas. Where appropriate, we will impose specific obligations within financial agreements with the states for an identified proportion of funding to be allocated to regional areas.

Government decentralisation and purchasing

The Nationals will establish a taskforce within the department of Prime Minister and Cabinet for the purpose of identifying opportunities to decentralise government service provision and relocate staff to regional locations where practical, and reviewing government purchasing and tendering policies to reduce the barriers for smaller, regional-based businesses to bid for contracts and deliver government services.

Regional Impact Statement

We also believe that the effects of government decisions on regional communities need to be taken into account, as part of the decision making process.

The Nationals assert that all Cabinet submissions must be accompanied by a Regional Impact Statement, outlining the economic, environmental and social consequences of government decisions on regional areas.

Regional Development Australia

Regional Development Australia must be made responsive to local communities, and be able to build partnerships between government and those communities.

The Nationals will establish local committees, comprising local leaders drawn from the community, business and government, to set the direction of each Regional Development Australia office. Committee members will be responsible for working with regional stakeholders to prepare plans that identify strategies to strengthen the region.

Working with state and local governments, universities, service organisations, cultural groups, sporting clubs, business and community leaders, each Regional Development Australia office will be required to assess local needs and identify targeted initiatives to support growth.

The restructured Regional Development Australia network will provide a gateway to federal government funding programs, via our fair share commitment, including a restructured Better Regions Program to support local projects and initiatives.

The Nationals will restructure the Regional Development Australia National Advisory Council to make it truly representative of the regions and able to make meaningful contributions to regional policy development. The new committee will have direct access to senior Ministers and will be consulted on key policy initiatives.

Sustainable Regions Program

The need for special assistance for regions facing major structural adjustment as a result of unexpected demographic or economic change has continued under the Labor Government. However, Labor policies such as buying irrigation properties are adding to social and economic trauma.

The need for a Sustainable Regions Program remains. The Nationals will restore a Sustainable Regions Program in areas of Australia facing specific economic, environmental and social challenges. The program will be designed to

support projects which create employment or establish new businesses, through partnerships between the private sector, government and the community.

Each region will have its own advisory panel comprising business, community and local leaders, who will consult with the community to determine the economic, community and social priorities for the region, and act as a first filter for potential projects.

Better Regions Program

The Nationals will broaden the Better Regions Program – a corrupted Labor version of the former Regional Partnerships program – to

provide funding for community projects supported by partnership funds from state and local governments, the community, private enterprise and individuals. All applications will undergo rigorous assessment.

The Better Regions Program will have three components: infrastructure project grants for large scale industry, tourism, community infrastructure and community service proposals; community grants for initiatives that increase social opportunities, community participation and interaction; and a range of small grants to help councils and not-for-profit organisations with minor community projects.

Regional Health

— a health system with a focus on regional living

Australians consistently identify health policy as their most important concern. Demands made on the public health system continue to rise as people live longer and new medical technologies become available.

Residents in capital cities enjoy many more services in their communities than people living in rural and regional areas.

We know that lack of services is a major deterrent for people, especially families, to move to jobs in the regions.

Despite the best efforts of dedicated local doctors, nurses and allied health professionals, medical services in rural areas are woefully and dangerously inadequate.

That is why we want health and hospital services to be locally run and why we have been so committed to incentives that attract and retain medical professionals in the regions.

We will enhance incentives for doctors and health professionals to take up regional practice and stay there. And we will go further with the advent of a dedicated Federal Minister for Regional Health to specifically oversee regional healthcare and the needs of regional patients.

Regional Australians struggle with reduced access to services and fewer health professionals while suffering higher rates of disease, more injuries and higher mortality rates. They find fewer obstetrics beds or aged care facilities, travel greater distances for radiotherapy, and have scant access to mental health services and less continuity of medical and nursing staff.

Medicare, which was meant to treat people equally and fairly, spends considerably more in metropolitan areas than in regional areas, despite

many regional areas having considerably worse health outcomes and greater need.

The Nationals strongly endorse the view of health professionals who work at the coalface that health reform must focus not only on governance, evidence, systems and funding, but also on people, relationships between providers and patients and culture.

Our Plan

Only The Nationals' Regional Health Plan can ensure that the one-third of Australians living in the regions get a fair go from the health system and a fair share of health funding.

In government, we will address the key issues for regional health services: access to healthcare professionals and decently equipped hospitals; and full-time access specialist services, such as oncology and mental health, rather than fly-in fly-out services.

Minister for Regional Health

Regional health deserves a higher profile in the overall health policy of government. When health policy decisions are being made regional concerns must be championed by a dedicated Minister with regional experience and a primary focus on the welfare of regional Australians.

The Minister for Regional Health will give full-time attention to regional health concerns, and win for regional health a high priority in general health policy. The first task will be to take the wide and often confusing array of programs for improving regional health and integrate them into a single policy. The Nationals will strengthen the Ministerial role by providing a specific regional unit within the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing.

Medicare

The National Health and Hospitals Reform Commission recommends that:

'funding equivalent to national average medical benefits and primary health care service funding, appropriately adjusted for remoteness and health status, be made available for local service provision where populations are under-served.'

This would come to an estimated maximum cost of \$143 million.

The Nationals will provide increased financial support for doctors who provide health services in regional and remote communities, through increased Medicare rebates and scheduled fees loaded on top of regular Medicare billings, which will increase according to remoteness.

We will engage with the relevant medical colleges to determine an appropriate scheduled Medicare fee for particular services delivered in regional and remote Australia. The financial benefits of regional practice will become more apparent and accessible.

This program will include allied health workers and nurses to attract a full range of health professionals to regional areas.

Medicare is too urban-centric and too doctor-centric. Medicare benefits per person in capital cities are one-sixth higher than in rural and remote areas. Medicare access to allied health services is restricted in regional areas that lack GPs.

In areas that have allied health professionals but lack GPs, The Nationals will allow Medicare claims for these services without a doctor's referral, helping to redress the imbalance in Medicare billings.

Regional hospitals

Regional hospitals are continually being downgraded to the point that they cannot meet the demands of the communities they serve.

Most of healthcare delivery operates through state government run bodies, with many decisions for regional areas made by central bureaucracies in capital cities.

The Nationals will provide guaranteed service levels for key regional hospitals in such fields as maternity, mental health, accident and emergency and public dentistry.

We will establish Local Hospital Boards for the larger public hospitals, as well as for groups of smaller hospitals, for those communities that desire them. These Local Hospital Boards will ensure that local hospitals meet local needs.

They will be funded directly by the Commonwealth and accountable to their community. Under our plan, communities will be provided with information on how their local hospitals are performing and the ability to achieve the outcomes they want.

The Nationals will redirect the money for super clinics to develop outpatient services attached to, or within, public hospitals. Most regional and rural hospitals do not have outpatient clinics like those run by metropolitan teaching hospitals for many years.

We will increase the number of paid trainee positions, internships and residencies in regional hospitals.

The Nationals will not support policies that lead to the closure of regional hospitals. All closures imposed by the Labor Government will be reversed by The Nationals in government.

Care of the elderly

The Nationals will provide funding for more aged care beds in regional areas. The same emphasis on funding and performance as proposed for regional hospitals will apply to aged care facilities.

Incentives will be provided for regional health professionals to broaden their skills to provide expert care of the elderly.

The Nationals' policy to empower local communities will ensure maximum co-operation and efficiencies between government and non-government organisations.

We will introduce funding for aged care beds under similar arrangements for hospitals by establishing a new system where federal and state funding is pooled into a single fund for each region that is managed at the regional level. This way community needs can best be identified and acted upon, and locals will own the outcomes of priorities and decisions.

Targeted funding for regional health infrastructure

The Nationals will establish a targeted regional health fund as part of our fair share commitment, providing funds for new regional health services, including incentives to attract and retain healthcare professionals in the regions.

We will ensure that funding for regional health priorities is permanent and 'ring-fenced'. Regional health practitioners will be able to rely on funding support.

Flexible practice options

In a typical regional medical practice, doctors face the stress of managing a small business, as well as their healthcare responsibilities. GPs in regional settings must buy or establish their practice and, when they leave, sell the practice. This added responsibility discourages many GPs from opening regional practices.

Many practitioners prefer to be employees, rather than managers, and to focus their attention on healthcare delivery.

The Nationals will introduce a federal plan to give GPs greater flexibility to practice in areas chronically short of medical professionals. The Nationals will take a much more pragmatic approach by giving existing practices capital

grants to allow expansion of their space and services.

This program will provide a broader range of services to regional communities, by creating the case for allied healthcare services, such as pathology and psychology, radiology and pharmaceuticals in practices managed by private providers, divisions of general practice or, if needed, by local government.

Healthcare practitioners may, therefore, become employees paid a suitable salary and, thereby, avoid many of the burdens that make regional medicine less attractive.

Overhaul Regional Incentive Programs

We will hold an immediate review into problems associated with using the Australian Standard Geographical Classification-Remoteness Areas (ASGC-RA) map to determine incentive payments paid to doctors who practise in regional Australia as the map allows doctors in a larger regional centre to be paid the same incentive as doctors practising in the smaller towns. We will ensure that any replacement is based on criteria that more accurately reflects the medical needs of individual communities in consultation with the Rural Doctors Association of Australia.

The plethora of complex programs designed to provide incentives for doctors to take up regional practice lower their effectiveness and skew services against regional areas in favour of outer metropolitan areas.

Since 2000, more than 30 separate programs designed to attract doctors to regional Australia have helped boost the numbers of health providers, but have had their effectiveness hindered by red tape, duplication and conflicting goals.

The Nationals will review and simplify these incentive programs to ensure that Medicare systems encourage regional practice. We will

retain the bonded scholarships program but increase the uptake rate by reducing the bonded duration from five to three years.

We will assess the suitability of the Queensland Rural Generalist training program with the aim of a nation-wide rollout of the scheme, as part of the COAG process, to assist in the attraction and retention of health professionals in regional areas by providing a clear career path and 'specialist' status for rural GPs.

We will work with the health services community to provide succession planning for our ageing specialist doctors, nurses and other healthcare professionals, by offering incentives to train the next generation of regional healthcare professionals.

Incentives for allied health workers

Many regions lack allied health professionals, such as dentists, nurses, optometrists, psychiatrists and other service providers.

The most recent statistics show that the overall number of medical practitioners employed per 100,000 people is 335 in major cities, but only 181 in inner regional areas, 153 in outer regional areas and 148 in remote or very remote areas.

There are 59 dentists per 100,000 people in major cities, but only 35 in inner regional, 29 in outer regional, and 20 in remote or very remote areas.

This is in spite of the fact that regional Australians suffer from higher rates of many diseases, more injuries and higher suicide and death rates.

The importance of allied healthcare is often overlooked. Many children in regional Australia miss out on appropriate early detection and treatment, growing up to suffer permanent learning problems. Similarly, the lack of pathology services in regional areas places an unfair additional burden on those living with HIV, Hepatitis and other blood borne viruses.

The National Regional Health Alliance confirms that incentive schemes and scholarship programs instituted under the previous Coalition government are delivering results. As part of their review of these programs, The Nationals will broaden the base to attract more dentists, nurses and other allied healthcare professionals to the regions.

Regional health targets

Australian Health Care Agreements formalise shared funding between the state and federal governments for acute care services in public hospitals. In the past, these agreements have set up goals for particular groups; and The Nationals will ensure that regional and remote Australians comprise one such group.

The Nationals will ensure that regional health targets are built into Health Care Agreements, and that the Federal Government rewards those states and territories that demonstrate improved delivery of health services to regional populations.

The agreements will also require an increase in the number of regional aged care places and additional programs for youth mental health.

Public-private partnerships

In government The Nationals will support the extension of the McGrath Foundation public-private partnership formula, which provides specialist breast care nurse positions throughout regional Australia.

This would apply to the Prostate Cancer Foundation of Australia and the Movember Foundation, placing 10 specialist prostate nurses throughout regional Australia.

Men facing surgery and treatment for prostate cancer can face side effects that have the potential to affect their quality of life, such as incontinence and impotence. This model of a public-private partnership gives communities

ownership over services, allowing them to have confidence in funds making it to local needs and take a hands-on approach in their own communities.

In this regard, the McGrath Foundation has proved a success model. The Nationals are aware that rural patients have poorer health outcomes when it comes to prostate cancer, with this cost-effective, resource sharing approach to improving outcomes for these patients and their families, something they desperately want and need.

Suicide prevention

More than 2000 Australians commit suicide each year; and that a disproportionately high number of completed suicides and suicide attempts involve men in rural areas. In government we will implement the key recommendations of the Senate Committee Report “The Hidden Toll: Suicide in Australia”, including but not limited to:

- Funding a national suicide prevention and awareness campaign, to be run for at least five years;
- Funding for projects to reduce access to ‘suicide hotspots’, according to established guidelines;
- Targeted measures to help prevent the incidence of suicide among high-risk groups in regional Australia.

Free vaccinations for Whooping Cough

The Nationals support the extension of free vaccinations for whooping cough to the grandparents of new born infants in all States and territories.

Hendra virus / Flying foxes

The Nationals support:

- Improved harmonisation of Federal and State laws and regulations relating to endangered or threatened species when they present serious disruption to human activities or health;
- Laws and regulations that provide greater flexibility as to the range of measures available to authorities in dealing with serious disruption to human activities or health by flying foxes; and
- All relevant government research facilities to give urgent priority to vaccine production and distribution to counter the Hendra virus in humans and horses or any other animal

Royal Flying Doctor Service

The Nationals will continue to provide financial support for the Royal Flying Doctor Service, in recognition of its vital role as the primary mantle of safety covering the vast expanses of regional and remote communities.

Men’s Sheds

The Nationals support Men’s Sheds and will concentrate the Ministerial responsibility for Men’s Sheds within the Health portfolio.

Hearing tests for children

The Nationals will introduce compulsory hearing tests for all children enrolling in primary school to assist in the early identification of problems.

Regional Youth

— opportunity and prosperity in vibrant, growing regions

The development and prosperity of regional Australia, and the survival of the lifestyle enjoyed by regional communities, depends on the ability to retain and attract young people.

This is consistent with The Nationals' plan to revitalise and populate regional Australia, through incentives for new businesses, domestic and migrant location in regional areas and the hard and soft infrastructure expected in modern communities.

Driving the growth of regional centres will deliver better and more opportunities and services for all in the communities and create a better value proposition for younger Australians to pursue.

Not only in retain regional youth lured away by the opportunities in capital cities, but in attracting forward-looking, driven and inspired youth into growing regional areas.

That pioneering spirit is alive and well in Australia, but it needs to be focused. We need to seriously address this population squeeze and pull the policy triggers that can re-energize and build the under-developed 97% of Australia that is regional.

That's where Australia's burgeoning, but still largely untapped, growth potential lies.

Likewise, services and facilities need to be appropriate in providing opportunities for young people in terms of social interaction, education, career and job opportunities.

Our Plan

Education

As outlined in the *Education* section of this policy platform, The Nationals insist young people deserve to access the best in education wherever they live and whatever they study.

Where learning facilities in a particular region are not viable, The Nationals in government will provide financial assistance to parents and organisations providing residential facilities and introduce a tertiary access allowance for students who are required to live away from home or travel long distances for their education.

This will include provision for students to return home at regular intervals.

We will increase the number of regional secondary schools acting as feeders to the universities. We will provide openings and help for high achievers at regional secondary schools to have early experience of university and TAFE, to encourage the application of their talents.

We will also reinstate agriculture and horticulture apprentices on the National Skills List, which Labor specifically abolished in 2008.

Overcoming social isolation

The Nationals are well aware of the damaging effects that social isolation can have on human health and wellbeing across all age groups, and right through the community, but none more so than among young people.

We will increase funding for key successful youth programs, in particular those programs aimed to connect young people with the broader community. Funds will be made available to establish or expand regionally-based facilities, such as youth centres where young people can interact with peers under limited adult supervision, and improve their lives through education, sport and recreation.

Life skills

Our young people need life skills. The Nationals in government will introduce a National Youth

Safety Program, to give students basic first aid competencies by Year 10 and provide all students with pre-driver education and training.

We will provide opportunities for young people to learn about drugs, obesity and general health, and increase funding to regional youth programs to avoid and overcome issues like drug and alcohol abuse, bullying, and manage mental health concerns.

Health

All Australians are entitled to top quality and accessible health services.

The Nationals in government will provide increased resources for regional health programs, and give the local health professionals the responsibility for decisions affecting their areas. Regional health service providers need to be skilled in the special mental and physical health needs of young people.

When full time residential care becomes necessary, we will provide that those with a disability can be cared for as close as possible to their families, and in facilities that cater specifically for young people.

Regional Youth Forum

The Nationals in government will re-organise the Australian Youth Forum to broaden participation from those outside the youth advocacy sector, and those engaged in employment and other pursuits.

We will foster participation by regional youth through a new Regional Youth Forum steering committee comprising young Australians living in regional and rural areas. The Regional Youth Forum will participate with, and form part of, the national Australian Youth Forum, but emphasise issues identified by young people living in regional Australia.

Providing career opportunities

Opportunities abound for secure, rewarding and prosperous careers in regional Australia, but young people are not being encouraged to pursue them.

The Nationals' plan for small business, regional development, education and primary production to grow the regional economy, will give young people confidence in pursuing a regionally-based career.

We will continue to encourage the decentralisation of large and small businesses, and the public sector, via our regional growth policies. Our policies encourage young people to study for careers, which support regional growth and food security, unlike Labor's centralistic view.

We will provide the financial incentives for young people to take up traineeships in the agricultural sector, on the same footing as other traineeships and apprenticeships, and will place tertiary-level agriculture and forestry courses in the National Priorities Category of the Students Contribution Band.

The Nationals will provide incentives for regional employers to give students work experience and gap year employment, to foster local career and job opportunities.

Seniors

— celebrating and respecting older Australians

Australians are living longer, more productive lives, and seeking to live independently in their own homes for as long as possible. This trend is in the government's interests; sensible policies assisting seniors to stay home are much less costly than institutional care.

It is not necessarily 'aged care' we look for as we get older, but healthcare and services appropriate for our stage of life.

Key to The Nationals' policy focus for senior Australians is the entitlement of all Australians to live with dignity throughout their lives. Our senior citizens are not welfare dependent, nor a drain on the economy. The experience and guidance of older Australians in the workforce is being recognised by employers.

Their lifelong contribution to society should be fostered and celebrated – seniors have paid their taxes, made Australia what it is today, and have more than earned their keep.

Older Australians enrich our communities, especially in the regions. Their contribution can be seen in the essential services which keep regional communities vibrant, including policing, work in court houses, assistance in schools and hospitals, and many other community-based activities.

Their civic service is vital to the health and vitality of regional Australia.

Our plan is to provide the best opportunities for older Australians in regional areas to remain healthy, active and engaged in the workforce and the community. Ageing productively keeps people healthy and refutes any perception that seniors become a burden as our society witnesses an ageing population.

Where high-level full-time aged care is required, seniors must have a say in the care they receive. Being in charge of one's own life, treated as a grown up, is a dignity our seniors are entitled to expect.

Our Plan

The Nationals' plan recognises that the great majority of older Australians contribute to society right through their later years when community attitudes allow them to, and when they are provided with the right services to remain healthy, active and engaged in the community.

For those in need of greater support, whether acute care or to help in overcoming social isolation, The Nationals' plan provides for more aged care beds, better mental illness services, and practical financial support for community groups.

Education and employment

Government and the corporate sector must take on a greater role in this area. The Nationals maintain that education is a lifelong experience, and the best results are achieved by governments working with business and local communities to provide high quality, appropriate facilities and services.

- Employers need more encouragement to hire and retain older staff, and to work with other employees to retrain and redeploy them in mutually agreeable roles.
- Specifically tailored training and education programs for seniors are necessary to ensure employers invest in up-skilling and re-skilling of older employee. In addition, we will provide support for educational institutions developing programs aimed at older Australians.

- Government can improve employment rates of senior Australians in the public service. While departments publish the details of the senior people, they are less forthcoming about the number of seniors recruited in the public service's annual intake.
- The Nationals will further counter age discrimination by assisting the unemployed over 50 to find meaningful work.
- For those pensioners who will undertake seasonal work, we will reform pension arrangements to support them in earning additional income. In particular, we will extend the practice of income averaging for those able to undertake seasonal work.
- To encourage seniors to stay in the workforce, we will abolish the superannuation guarantee limit, and remove the bureaucratic impediments and disincentives which discourage people from working beyond pensionable age.

Retirement income and planning

The overwhelming concern seniors often express is their uncertainty about how to plan and budget for their retirement.

Government shifting of goalposts disadvantages those looking to retire. It is not just frustrating, it fuels anxieties and can be financially crippling. Australians in general are encouraged to prepare for retirement with careful and considered planning of their financial and lifestyle needs, but too few do so.

- We will provide initiatives for the certainty people need in retirement planning. Those on fixed incomes – whether pensioners or self-funded retirees – have very limited financial flexibility, and lack the disposable income of those in the work force to adapt their circumstances and respond to change.

- Our reforms will encourage people to prepare for retirement, by means such as tax enhanced tax treatment of savings.
- We will make the cost of financial planning tax deductible.
- We will require greater accountability from superannuation funds. We will require these funds to deliver high quality service and performance, to justify their privileged position under the Superannuation Levy Guarantee.
- We will establish a consumer protection program for older Australians.

Health and aged care

In declaring that all Australians are entitled to the highest quality of care and that such care must be provided respectfully and with dignity, The Nationals will pledge the following:

- Older Australians need incentives to retain private health insurance cover. For many, their optimal take up of health cover comes when they can least afford it. In government, The Nationals brought in the 30% rebate on private health insurance, and then extended it to 35%, and 40% for seniors. We remain committed to these incentives.
- The Nationals support greater access to the Commonwealth Seniors Health Card for self-funded retirees. Through our regional health programs we will increase sub-acute care support for older Australians, improve dental care and provide more equitable access to Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (free) medications for seniors.
- We will address many people's biggest fear – the quality of care they receive as they grow older. The Nationals will keep the health system oriented toward the kind of care Australians want for themselves or their loved ones.

- The Nationals also believe it is important for families to stay together wherever possible. This can be difficult in regional areas, where older parents and grandparents are involved, and where appropriate aged care facilities may be far from the family base. We will provide dedicated funding, and will work with all levels of government and community, to increase the number of aged care facilities and places in regional areas, and to boost the number of aged care beds there.
- As the population ages, the same expectations of funding and performance proposed for regional hospitals must be applied also to aged care facilities. Incentives will be provided for regional health professionals to broaden their skills in providing expert care to the elderly.
- The Nationals will introduce funding for aged care beds under similar arrangements for hospitals by establishing a new system where Commonwealth and State funding for aged care services is pooled into a single fund for each region, managed at the regional level by people who can best identify community needs, directly oversee the real costs, and who will experience the local benefits of their decisions.
- The Nationals package will remove the anxiety felt among older Australians about the adequacy of staff levels in aged care. On a proportional basis, the numbers of staff – particularly nurses – are shrinking, and care is suffering.
- The Nationals support the appointment of an Aged Care Ombudsman, to give people more confidence in the system by providing an independent office to investigate the issues no statutory body or government department currently does.
- Family members often provide part-time or full-time care for relatives as they age. As care needs intensify, so does the pressure on the families. Respite care is important, providing much-needed support, and often helping people stay at home longer. Flexibility is needed in how respite care is provided, both for immediate needs and for the future planning required. The population age shift will bring new and different challenges in the provision of respite care.
- Social isolation damages health and wellbeing. The Nationals support community initiatives to prevent it. Volunteer programs are valuable. However, those in aged care but not receiving any government funding support (through the facility in which they are housed), are prohibited from accessing the volunteer services. We will remove this anomaly, to maximise the reach of volunteer programs dealing with social isolation.

Small Business and Tourism

— realising the potential in regional enterprise

The Nationals is the Party of, and for, small business. We recognise that regional Australia depends on small business to drive local economies and regional prosperity.

In recent years, there has been a major diversification in the activity undertaken by small businesses in regional Australia – a move away from a mainly rural-based industry structure to include services, tourism and manufacturing.

The majority of businesses in regional Australia employ fewer than 20 people but, across the board, the sector is the largest employer. Of the 1,880,000 small businesses throughout Australia, some 35% – more than 650,000 – operate in regional Australia.

To be competitive, small businesses in regional Australia must have the same opportunities to share in the benefits of technology as those in the capital cities.

The chronic skills shortage in regional areas is another major impediment for small business. To assist to overcome this, The Nationals' will make temporary business visas (457s) more accessible to regional businesses, as well as requiring skilled, semi-skilled and non-skilled migrants to be bonded to regional areas with relevant labour needs.

This is especially the case with tourism, where regional Australia struggles to get its share of the international visitor market. The ratio of domestic to international visitors in the regions is as high as 19:1. While Australia, as a whole, is seen as a desirable destination, the major cities and east coast derive most of the benefits.

Our Plan

Easing the burdens

The Nationals recognise that success in maintaining existing businesses and attracting business people in relocating to regional areas depends on access to quality services expected as part of modern living, including education, health, infrastructure and transport.

The Nationals aim to give small businesses the competitive environment and the tools they need to make the best of opportunities, in both domestic and international markets.

We will work with industry associations and academic institutions to develop small business education programs aimed at increasing efficiency and productivity.

The vast number of interlocking and confusing regulations covering business activity at the federal, state and local levels must be simplified. The Nationals commit to reinvigorating previous programs to remove red tape at all levels of government.

This includes combating the indirect red tape that results from restrictions imposed by governments on other businesses, such as financial institutions, that is then carried through to their small business clients.

The Nationals will continue our leadership role in ensuring that small business can compete on a level playing field with bigger businesses. Healthy competition is good, but small businesses must be protected from unfair competition by powerful resource-rich companies.

The Nationals have taken the lead in addressing deficiencies in the *Trade Practices Act* and will continue to address weaknesses in trade

practices legislation affecting small business competitiveness. We will also better resource the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission to take action against large corporations that abuse their market power.

Many economic and social advantages are evident for businesses operating in regional areas. The Nationals will support initiatives to make city businesses aware of these advantages and to encourage Australians to enjoy the benefits of a non-metropolitan lifestyle.

The Nationals will also undertake a review of the effect of additional costs on businesses outside the capital cities, with a view to determining what regional incentives could be introduced to encourage businesses to relocate from the capital cities

The Nationals in government will provide a 30% investment allowance to assist small business in regional areas to expand and to create jobs, or for capital city businesses to relocate. The allowance will be for increasing business capacity, such as major new plant acquisitions or increasing production capacity.

It will be subject to requirements like job creation benchmarks and output increases. The program will exclude passive investment, such as commercial property investment for lease.

The Nationals will review the impact of internet trading on regional small businesses by reviewing the duty and tax exemption for imported goods valued at less than \$1,000.

The Nationals recognise that online shopping is now a fact of life, but believe that there is a need to level the playing field, particularly for franchisees that are bound by restrictive purchasing practices that impact on their ability to compete on price.

We will review the *Trade Practices Act* to ensure that franchisees and others are not disadvantaged by agreements that prevent them from purchasing product at the most competitive price.

In order to help retain small businesses in regional areas, The Nationals will encourage local planning authorities to take into account competitiveness issues when considering approvals for new or expanded retail developments. State planning systems should take into account dominance in the retail sector as part of the net community benefits test.

Support for Co-operatives

The Nationals in government will support the introduction of Co-operatives National Law as a priority. Consistent with the proposals being put to the Council of Australian Governments, a uniform system will:

- Provide nationally consistent laws to replace the separate legislation currently operating in states and territories.
- Provide the method for applying and maintaining the uniform legislation and regulations.
- Apply a clear guide for how the law interacts with the *Corporations Act 2001*.
- Ensure that the provisions of the *Corporations Act 2001* relevant to co-operatives are applied uniformly across states and territories.
- Simplify the financial and auditing requirements for small co-operatives.
- Reduce red-tape and restrictions on co-operatives operating across states and territories.
- Introduce nationally consistent provisions for the supervision of co-operatives.

The process of harmonisation will allow support of co-operatives from a national level and will allow national advocacy for co-operatives.

The Nationals in government will also review methods to change the Australian accounting standards that treat share capital in co-operatives as a liability on co-operative balance sheets.

Fair credit card merchant fees

The Nationals in government will introduce legislation to ban merchants from placing a surcharge on credit card transactions above the amount (as expressed in percentage of goods purchased) charged to the merchant by the credit card issuer for a transaction.

In addition, credit card issuers will be prohibited from crediting back any revenue derived from merchant credit transactions. Such a prohibition would prevent an issuer from charging a merchant an inflated percentage on a transaction with an agreement that the issuer will credit a certain amount back to the merchant at periodic intervals.

Consumer ombudsman

The Nationals will provide stronger protections for small businesses and farmers from anti-competitive conduct, including through:

- The establishment of a Commonwealth Australian Small Business and Farming Commissioner modelled on the Victorian Small Business Commissioner;
- An amendment to the Competition and Consumer Act to provide an effective prohibition against anti-competitive price discrimination;
- The strengthening of section 50 of the Competition and Consumer Act to prohibit 'creeping acquisitions', which individually substantially lessen competition, but which over time lead to the increased dominance of merged entities; and
- The development of a code of conduct covering large retailer-supplier dealings and dispute resolution processes.

Receivers and administrators

The Nationals notes and condemns cases where family farms have been mismanaged by receivers

and/or administrators, resulting in the value of the asset being diminished and unnecessary hardship caused; and in government will provide greater protection for family farms from receivership including the establishment of a Small Business and Farming Commissioner able to intervene in such cases.

Farm debt mediation

In government The Nationals will work with all States/Territories to achieve a national farm debt mediation standard to assist the finance sector and farmers overcome cross-border anomalies and misunderstandings

Award modernisation

The Nationals support the rationalisation and updating of industrial awards and the introduction of greater flexibility. Small businesses are generally more reliant on the award structure than larger businesses, even more so in the regions.

The Nationals do not support Labor's objective of removing pay differentials between different parts of Australia or the imposition of common penalty rates.

Unlike Labor, The Nationals understand that strawberries do not only ripen between 9am and 5pm on weekdays; that prawn trawler crews do not come home for dinner every evening; that country shows are generally held on public holidays; and that family wineries do most of their business on weekends.

The Nationals in government will instruct the Australian Industrial Relations Commission to recognise the special circumstances of businesses operating outside the major capital cities and to establish a pay structure accordingly.

Workers and employees should have a workplace relations framework that allows them both to make changes to working conditions that are advantageous to both, with the overriding

requirement that safe working practices are not traded off.

The Nationals consider that where there is a monopoly situation enjoyed by unions, it should be abolished. The principle of the 'conveniently belong rule' of 1905 should be removed to provide competition within the union movement by allowing workers to freely form and maintain new registered unions in competition with existing unions.

The global economy

The Nationals support a 'Small Business Action Plan' to respond to fluctuations in the global economy. Measures will include:

- Tax loss carry-back to allow businesses to offset operating losses and retain staff by claiming back taxes paid over the past three years, up to a \$100,000 limit.
- OECD-best practice regulation, whereby, the Commonwealth will undertake a comprehensive audit of all the federal, state and local paperwork needed to start or expand a business and will ensure that this overhead burden is reduced to at least match OECD best practice.
- A one-stop shop regulation portal to deliver integrated online access to all forms and filings, regardless of the level of government imposing them.
- Support for family businesses to provide support and advice for family businesses on succession planning and family business development.

Supporting regional tourism

Local tourism in regional Australia needs to be supported by vocational and professional training of tourism operators and suppliers. Education of tour operators, tourism outlets and the commercial sector is vital to take advantage of the information available.

The Nationals support the establishment of a regional tourism training initiative to improve the skills and professional standards of tourism operators, and to assist them to meet the particular challenges presented by regional tourist activities.

The initiative would encompass a number of programs to meet the needs of various tourism industry sectors, such as:

- Grants to existing and new tourist operators of farm stays, motels, bed and breakfasts, and wineries for training in marketing and promotion, with particular emphasis on online marketing.
- Training rebates for travel agents and tourism operators who undertake a training course or accreditation in regional tourism, based on the number of bed nights they sell into regional Australia within a prescribed period.
- A national database and rating system, similar to the motel star system, listing tourism businesses and outlets that successfully complete vocational training courses related to tourism.
- Funding for specific regional education tours for major tourism operators, similar to the programs now conducted by other countries, to enable travel consultants to gain a better understanding of what is on offer.

Many regional community, cultural and sporting events need government support from time to time, as the regional economy ebbs and flows. Support is currently available only on an ad hoc basis from governments and government business entities.

The future of the Australian Tourism Development Program and federal government funding of tourism activities is uncertain. While local governments bear the brunt of the cost of tourism promotion in the regions, many local governments

cannot afford to provide funding on a consistent and continuing basis.

The Nationals believe that all levels of government must commit to funding tourist promotion and that the federal government should play a leading role. Regions need consistent support to compete at an international level. We support the development of a three year, 'See Australia First' campaign focused on regional tourism markets.

The Nationals support the establishment of a federal tourism fund to provide project-specific grants to support regional promotion campaigns or major regional tourism and entertainment events. The grants process will be competitive, with a major criterion being the ability of the project to generate long-term shifts in tourist behaviour. We also support the establishment of

a permanent 'Regional Tourism Disaster Fund' to be used to assist with marketing campaigns in the aftermath of natural disasters.

Poker machine pre-commitment technology

The Nationals recognize the social and commercial benefits that clubs and pubs bring to regional communities and while we support the implementation of voluntary responsible gambling initiatives from clubs and pubs, we oppose any mandatory pre-commitment technology measures, as these measures will be harmful to the viability of clubs and pubs in rural and regional areas and we oppose the proposed \$250 limit on ATM's located in clubs and pubs.

Social Justice

— a fair go for all Australians

Underpinning all Nationals' philosophy is the notion of a fair go for all Australians, wherever they live. Equality of opportunity to participate in our community to the full extent of ability, capacity and desire is the birth-right of every Australian.

As The Nationals represent some of the most disadvantaged electorates in the country, the plight of our seniors, carers, those with a disability, our Indigenous population and others who are underprivileged is our core concern. Our commitment to social justice is the foundation of all of our policies.

The Nationals opposes any attempt to introduce a statutory or constitutional charter of human rights.

Caring for fellow Australians

One of The Nationals' core values is to provide security for Australian communities and their families through the preservation of decent health, safety, social and economic welfare standards.

The Nationals believe in:

- Reasonable access to quality, affordable health care and education for all Australians, regardless of their location and personal circumstances.
- Improved support services for those with a disability and their carers to better meet the needs of disabled people and their family carers. The Nationals will provide greater support for community groups engaged in the provision of accommodation to provide accommodation on a long term sustainable basis.
- Provision of programs to assist those parents with disabled children to plan for their future, including greater support from Government through arrangements such as taxation offsets and disability trusts.

- The Nationals recognise the urgent need to assist ageing parents and carers of disabled children and in government will:
- Introduce the former Coalition Government's Special Disability Trust program and removal of capital gains tax on the transfer of property into special disability trusts, and concentrate the Ministerial responsibility for disability services within a single portfolio.
- Support the implementation of a lifelong care and support system, along the lines of the Productivity Commission report on a National Disability Insurance Scheme, for all Australians with a significant disability whether acquired at or after birth.
- Provision of resources to public and private education facilities to meet the needs of disabled.
- Provision of resources to public and private education facilities to meet the needs of disabled students to enable them to reach their full potential.
- Ensuring that there are sufficient accommodation places and support to meet the needs of all ageing people with a disability who require such a placement.
- Providing resources so that young people who require 24-hour care have separate specialised accommodation, rather than being placed in nursing homes for the aged.
- Upholding the rights of Indigenous Australians and recognising their special needs through properly resourced programs directed to promoting self-help, self-respect, education and job creation.

- Adequate funding of law enforcement and counselling services specifically directed to personal security and to overcoming domestic violence and alcohol and drug abuse and in particular support for the expansion of community crime prevention programs aimed at supporting police, local councils and community groups to develop local solutions to local problems, including the expanded use of closed circuit television and other cost-effective measures to improve community safety.
- Increased funding to combat youth mental health issues and to support better relationships between child and adolescent mental health services and adult mental health services.
- Ensuring that programs directed to the care and welfare of children provides men and women with the choice of either seeking childcare outside the home or within the home.
- The Nationals will support the provision of travel assistance for former prisoners of war wishing to travel overseas to attend one significant commemoration ceremony.

A fair and accessible legal system

The Nationals are determined to eliminate the divide between those living in and those living outside major capital cities, including any limitation in access to a fair legal system that respects the rights and responsibilities of all Australians.

The Nationals are committed to:

- Ensuring the legal system is accessible to all Australians regardless of their circumstances.
- Reviewing the family law and child support system to ensure that the interests of children are paramount.
- Removing any discrimination against sexual preference while maintaining the sanctity of marriage between a man and woman.

Trade

— driving regional economies to build a stronger Australia

International trade is a major driver of growth for regional Australia. It creates new jobs, improves living standards and ensures our future as a prosperous nation.

One-in-four-jobs in regional Australia is directly or indirectly linked to exports. When The Nationals were in government, exports from regional Australia grew three times faster than exports from major cities. About a quarter of regional Australia's income now comes from exports.

Trade is a two-way street. Australia will continue to import the finance, technology and innovation needed to develop the country and to make our industries more competitive. We also need to import consumer goods we do not produce, and to use imports to ensure year round supplies of seasonal foods.

It is essential that Australia's quarantine and inspection services receive sufficient funding and support to counter any pest or disease threats, which imports may pose, and to ensure that our products being exported are of the highest standard and meet the requirements of our export markets.

Only The Nationals can ensure that regional Australia receives its fair share of the benefits generated by our export industries, and that the regions are provided with the infrastructure and services necessary for these export industries to grow and prosper.

We will fight to ensure better access to international markets for our farmers, manufacturers, miners and service providers. We will ensure that our science-based quarantine services are properly resourced to protect Australia's disease-free status.

Our Plan

Support for exporters

The Nationals will stimulate new investment and new export jobs in regional Australia. We will introduce new targeted incentives for exporters and provide certainty in existing programs to support regional businesses.

Our industrial relations policies will ensure that maximum efficiency is maintained on the waterfront and other areas of frontline export activity.

We will provide the infrastructure support – roads, rail, ports and telecommunications – to enable our regions to compete on fair terms with city-based businesses. We will ensure that Australian businesses can compete fairly against imports, and we will ensure that Australia's disease-free status is protected.

We will continue to support the live animal export trade and the further enhancement of animal welfare within the trade in partnership with Australia's trading partners.

New markets

In the international arena, The Nationals will pursue a policy based on multilateral and bilateral trade negotiations and trade promotion. We will pursue an ambitious outcome to the Doha Round of World Trade Organisation (WTO) negotiations – one which delivers genuine new commercial opportunities for our farm, mining, manufacturing and service sectors.

In October 2011, Labor abandoned the Doha Round, declaring it dead and, instead, announced it will pursue sector-by-sector deals with our trading partners.

The Nationals insist that any bilateral or multilateral trade agreements must be comprehensive and all-inclusive. Agriculture remains the most distorted area of global trade with our farmers suffering at the hands of protectionist trade barriers – such as subsidies, tariffs and quotas – applied in our destination markets.

With agriculture the single greatest stumbling block to the successful completion of the Doha Round, farm products will be the first targeted for carve outs in any sector-by-sector negotiations.

We will use the WTO dispute settlement system aggressively to remove barriers to Australian exports and to ensure that international trade rules are open, fair and enforceable.

We will establish the senior position of Ambassador for Trade Reform to promote further trade reform internationally. We will maintain the position of Trade Representative for Australia's agricultural industries and will establish two new roles: Trade Representative for Australia's manufacturing industries and Trade Representative for Australia's service industries.

Free Trade Agreements

The Nationals will continue to negotiate Free Trade Agreements with our major trading partners and will seek opportunities for regional agreements, but only where substantial additional commercial benefits to Australia can be demonstrated and delivered.

We will restore the effort to complete ambitious and comprehensive new Free Trade Agreements with our biggest trading partners including China, Japan, Korea, India and the Gulf Co-operation Council.

Industry Support

The Nationals will develop a new regional centres network to provide quick and efficient support for new exporting industries, particularly the services industry.

We will increase funding for the Export Markets Development Grants scheme and provide certainty of payment.

We will introduce new programs to increase Australia's services exports to assist niche export sectors to compete in global supply chains and to increase food and beverage export sales in key markets.

The Nationals will reduce the cost of quarantine export inspections by reinstating the 40% cost- sharing arrangement for export inspection services, which Labor abolished.

We will ensure that our quarantine authorities receive the funding necessary to protect Australia from introduced pests and diseases.

Our Import Risk Assessment process will continue to be based on sound science, but we will not take reckless risks – as Labor has done – with our nation's priceless pest- and disease-free status.

The Nationals remain fervent supporters of anti-dumping measures and, upon a return to government, will ensure that the importation of cheap paper products from Indonesia and China does not impact unfairly on Australian produces.

Transport

— a strategic overhaul to link networks and drive efficiencies

The Nationals understand the importance of transport infrastructure – by roads, rail, air and sea – to regional Australia. We know that people and businesses in regional Australia rely on modern transport networks for their livelihoods and lifestyles.

Only The Nationals can ensure that families in regional Australia have a safe, secure, reliable and affordable transport system. The Nationals will ensure that regional Australia receives its fair share of national infrastructure spending.

Under a succession of Nationals Federal Transport Ministers, Australia gained improved transport infrastructure and services. The AusLink initiative, in particular, for the first time heralded an integrated approach to the nation's road and rail transport needs, plus the funding to achieve it.

Under Labor, Australia's transport plans are unravelling, replaced by the same short-sighted political decision-making and deal-making that has brought state Labor government transport systems to their knees.

The Nationals retain a clear vision of Australia's transport needs, and how to meet them. Our co-ordinated policy solutions will allow regional Australia and the nation to meet the transport challenges of the next 20 years and beyond.

Our Plan

Rail and a burgeoning freight task

With Australia's national freight load set to double by 2030 – and treble along the eastern seaboard, an enormous effort must be made to expand and modernise our interstate and regional rail systems.

The Nationals understand that a seamless and efficient rail network is essential to

moving our regional produce to market, enhancing productivity growth and international competitiveness.

The Nationals will build the inland rail from Melbourne through the Central West of NSW to Brisbane. This 'Steel Mississippi' will reduce the time required to move freight from Melbourne to Brisbane from 36 hours to less than 24 hours, dramatically lifting rail's share of freight and providing significant environmental and social benefits.

The inland rail project will be completed by around 2020 and will be managed by the Australian Rail Track Corporation in partnership with the private sector. The Nationals will ensure that any existing regional hub lines that feed into the main inland rail line are appropriately upgraded and, where necessary, new lines are constructed.

State Labor governments have neglected country branch lines and many have fallen into disrepair. Millions of tonnes of grain must now be moved to port by private truck, damaging our regional roads and increasing traffic congestion. Our reputation as a reliable supplier of grain has been badly compromised by this inability to move grain to ports on time, resulting in lost contracts and lower returns to growers.

The Nationals will provide funding, matched by the states, to restore key country freight lines. The Nationals will also continue to upgrade the Sydney- Brisbane coastal rail link. We will ensure that state-of-the-art train control systems are established and there is a seamless transit at state borders.

We will complete the extension of the national network into Queensland, and seek to incorporate the Kalgoorlie to Perth section, to provide a standard gauge rail link from Brisbane to Perth.

A new approach to roads

The Nationals will immediately commence planning for the third stage of AusLink, with minimum funding of \$35 billion.

AusLink 3 will be funded by allocating 20 cents per litre from Commonwealth fuel excise to AusLink. The rate of excise will not be increased. The Nationals will ensure that a minimum of 40% of the funds is allocated to regional projects.

The Nationals developed the successful Roads to Recovery program, which provides local councils with extra funding to maintain and upgrade their local roads. The Nationals will continue and expand this program in government. We will restore the Strategic Regional Roads program, which supports major regional connections and creates jobs and include agricultural productivity as one criteria when allocating funding.

We will address state government neglect of small road bridges on secondary freight routes. For regional Australia, small road bridges have great economic significance, allowing trucks to move goods and produce on to the national highway system and to shipping ports.

The Nationals will ensure that funding is allocated in partnership with local councils and state governments to repair or replace bridges no longer capable of carrying heavy vehicles.

The Nationals will ensure that our regional roads are safer. We will work with automobile associations and with organisations like Rotary to implement new driver training programs for young drivers.

We will require all new cars sold in Australia in volume to carry an Australian National Car Assessment Program (ANCAP) star safety rating.

We will provide funding for the installation of seatbelts in local school buses and make funding available to help install air conditioning in hotter areas. We will fund the construction of 500 new roadside stops for our truck drivers.

The Nationals will request a comprehensive review of the effectiveness of booster seats, with the view to maximising the safety afforded to children in motor vehicles.

The Nationals will ensure that the Australian Road Assessment Program, which measures the safety level of highways, is extended to the major secondary freight routes.

Regional access to aviation services

For the 7,000,000 Australians who live outside capital cities, regional aviation is an especially important link to the rest of the nation, providing transport, goods and medical services to and from large centres.

It is essential to support regional aviation, since many regional routes are of limited commercial value, with smaller carriers struggling with rising overheads and economic difficulties.

The Nationals will retain the Remote Air Service Subsidy Scheme (RASS) so that isolated communities continue to receive a weekly passenger and freight service. The RASS subsidises flights to more than 235 communities which otherwise have no regular transport service.

The En Route Charges Scheme fully refunds Air Services Australia's air navigation charges for a number of regional airlines operating smaller aircraft and for aero-medical operators such as the Royal Flying Doctor Service. The En Route Charges Scheme helps regional airlines to maintain viable services to isolated areas.

From 1 July 2008, Labor limited the scheme to existing routes and service frequencies and from 30 June 2012 the scheme will be abolished for commercial regional airline operators. The Nationals will reopen the En Route Charges Scheme to commercial air carriers and will keep it beyond 2012.

Labor has introduced mandatory security screening at a number of regional airports served

by larger passenger turbo-prop aircraft, but not jets. The ongoing cost of this requirement is not subsidised and can only be paid for by very large ticket price increases.

This threatens the viability of already marginal regional air routes. The Nationals will work with regional airlines and airports to ensure that no air services are cancelled or reduced as a result of national security requirements.

The Nationals will continue and expand the Remote Aerodrome Safety Program to assist in the upgrade of airstrips in remote and isolated communities.

The Nationals will also support general aviation – that part of the aviation sector not involved in regular public transport or scheduled services. It involves small aircraft undertaking roles vital to regional Australia, such as charter and business flights, aero-medical services, commercial and private pilot training, sports and recreational pursuits, and various kinds of aerial work such as agriculture and surveying.

The non-scheduled air and space transport sector comprises more than 1,000 businesses, employing nearly 4000 people, and producing an industry turnover of nearly \$1 billion. Australia's general aviation fleet is ageing, with the average age of an aircraft now 30 years.

The Nationals will introduce incentives to enable business to replace aircraft used for commercial activities and to keep regional Australia flying.

The Nationals will address the skill shortage in the aviation industry. We will build on existing regional pilot training schemes such as that operated by Regional Express, including the establishment of a Regional Airline Pilots' Scholarship Scheme.

More efficient shipping

Coastal shipping accounts for about 25% of the domestic freight task, but produces only 4% of total transport greenhouse gas emissions. A vibrant, safe and efficient Australian shipping industry provides benefits for the economy, the environment and eases road congestion.

The Nationals will introduce the means to allow Australian shipping to compete effectively against other transport modes and internationally, while retaining our national shipping identity.

The Nationals will:

- Introduce a tonnage tax to replace company tax on an opt-in basis, linked to mandatory training arrangements.
- Introduce a national system of training support under the supervision of the Australian Maritime Safety Authority to replace the existing state-based distribution of funds.
- Examine ways to reduce the income tax disadvantage suffered by Australian seafarers operating outside Australian waters, compared with seafarers from other nations.
- Establish an Australian Second Shipping Register.

Efficient port infrastructure is vital in promoting a growing maritime industry.

Australian ports are owned either by state governments or private enterprise, which are regulated by the states. As a result, port development has been uncoordinated and hindered, and the intermodal links between rail, road and shipping are grossly inefficient.

The Nationals will implement a National Port Development Plan to address capacity constraints in our ports and facilitate the efficient and swift movement of our exports.

Transport Fuels

— promoting use of cleaner biofuels and LPG

Australia needs a range of cleaner alternative fuels. LPG, ethanol blended fuel and biodiesel offer effective steps towards reducing vehicle emissions. If Australia was to adopt E10 blended fuels nationwide, more than 3,000,000 tonnes of pollution would be prevented.

A robust Australian biofuels and LPG industry will ensure greater security of supply in transportation fuels. The Nationals support the wider integration of E10 ethanol and B5 bio diesel into mainstream use in Australia, along with greater uptake of LPG.

We want to see E85 blend in widespread use by 2020.

Under Labor, the cleaner fuel sectors have been sent stop-start-stop signals, with alternative fuels policy implementation and uptake stalling.

The establishment of a thriving biofuels industry has many benefits for regional Australia. Most notable are the better environmental outcomes, a more diverse income source for farmers and the jobs created by the construction and operation of refinery plants.

The Nationals support cleaner fuels because they are good for the environment and a substantial step toward developing national fuel self-sufficiency.

Our Plan

The Nationals take a pragmatic and decisive approach to expanding the uptake of LPG, E10 fuel blends and the development of greater biodiesel production suitable for commercial and personal use, as well as regional industries.

A national mandate

A national ethanol mandate for petrol and biodiesel will be introduced by 2015.

Many of the states have introduced ethanol mandates, or are in the process of doing so. To

ensure uniformity, The Nationals in government will introduce a national mandate that ensures each state and territory has an ethanol blend.

The introduction of this measure forms part of an overall strategy to meet renewable fuel targets and reduce CO2 emissions.

In consultation with industry, The Nationals have found most local producers believe they can meet a substantial amount of Australia's demand. In order to ensure security of supply, The Nationals will support the local industry to become embedded.

Domestic production excise deferral

To assist the environment, and the further development of a locally-based ethanol and biodiesel industry, The Nationals supported a deferral of the introduction of excise on these fuels.

We will also ensure that imports of biofuels, which are subsidised by foreign governments, will not receive the benefits of the excise rebate in Australia.

The Nationals will address any excise loop holes and ensure that our producers are operating on an even playing field.

Sustainability standard

The Nationals will also seek to ensure that both domestic and imported biofuels meet a sustainability standard, including the provision that, in the long-term, fuels must not be produced at the expense of food security.

Sustainability standards for bio fuels are being developed in several European countries and Brazil, and can encourage biofuel producers to move from food stocks to non-food stock materials for fuel production.

Australia predominantly produces biofuels from waste or low grade products. A sustainability standard not only protects Australia's interests, but ensures global grain trading is not artificially distorted, balanced and prevents abuses of environmental or human rights in the production of biofuels.

Retail fuel costs

The Nationals acknowledge that retail providers face the costs of updating fuel tanks to accommodate biofuels.

We are particularly concerned that the small independent rural and remote retailers will find the transition costs prohibitive. We understand that petroleum storage tanks at retail outlets manufactured after 1981 are compatible with a 10% ethanol blend, but some will require new lining to prevent leakage.

The Nationals will work with the states to develop funding schemes that complement the existing assistance offered by some state governments.

85% biofuel blends from 2015

Car manufacturers are often ahead of fuel suppliers in manufacturing vehicles able to use a range of ethanol blended fuels.

In 2010, Holden launched its E85 flex fuel vehicle, able to run on blended fuel from E10 to E85. With emerging technologies now adopting higher ethanol blends, it is realistic to project that by 2020 most new Australian vehicles will be able to use the E85 blend.

After 2015, The Nationals' implementation plan will be based on extending the availability of E85 blends.

Promoting LPG

Australia has an abundance of LPG. In 2008-09, Australia produced 5,403 ML of LPG and used 3,996 ML, of which 2,253 ML was for automotive use. Considerable environmental and

energy security benefits attach to continuing to encourage the use of LPG.

The Coalition introduced the LPG conversion scheme, which provided a grant of \$2,000 for the LPG conversion of new or used petrol or diesel motor vehicles or the purchase of a new LPG vehicle.

Labor is phasing the conversion grant down to \$1,000 over the period to 1 July 2012. As a result, conversion rates have halved, while 20,000 new LPG vehicles are sold each year.

The Nationals support the LPG Conversion Scheme and will provide an LPG research and development program, including development of a Collaborative Centre for Gas Systems Development and Certification, as requested by the LPG industry.

Exploration for oil

Part of ensuring security of fuel supply rests on the continuation of oil exploration. Oil serves as the basis for blended diesel and ethanol products. Consequently, it is important that Australia makes the fullest use of its own oil reserves.

The Nationals support oil exploration activity and will promote further oil exploration in Australia and its territories.

Research and development

Research on second-generation biofuels, such as ethanol from cellulose and biodiesel from algae, has faltered. More research is needed to optimise the adoption of non-food stock materials and to encourage car manufacturing innovations.

The Nationals will provide a support package comprising:

- A new consumer information campaign.
- New requirements that all petrol engine cars sold in Australia have warranty cover for E10.
- Increased research and support for the development of second generation bio fuels.

Water Assets

– striking the economic, environmental and social balance

Careful management and sound decisions about water allocations and usage are essential to our long-term economic, environmental and social wellbeing.

The Nationals are committed to effective management of Australia's water resources. We led the way in introducing water resources reform and have set the agenda for water trading by introducing legislation aimed at better water sharing agreements.

The Nationals' credentials in water resource management are founded on sound planning and a respect for the rights of all Australians.

We will help land and water management groups to carry out practical, day-to-day projects that ensure compatibility between environmental sustainability and land and water use.

Understanding and respecting the role of Landcare groups within our communities is essential and will ensure they have sufficient funding to continue their good work. We will work with local communities and other stakeholders to understand the water needs of rural industries and communities.

We will help ensure the future viability of Australia's irrigated communities, while still allowing ample water to flow to maintain the health of our river systems.

The Nationals will monitor the national water policy framework to ensure that a fair balance between water for the environment and water for agriculture is achieved.

We will support the establishment of new water harvesting schemes, including new irrigation areas in northern Australia, where high rainfall and untapped river systems provide new opportunities.

The Nationals condemn the Labor Government for continuing to carry out water buybacks in the Murray-Darling Basin in a non-strategic way and for failing to invest in water saving infrastructure. We will implement a policy incorporating a strategic buyback program that first establishes the true economic and social costs of removing irrigated farming from a particular area before committing to a buyback.

Our Plan

Support for local communities

The Nationals will work with local communities on practical projects that save water in our cities and towns.

There are currently no specific national funding opportunities for schools and community groups for this purpose. We recognise the importance of allowing local groups to play their part in water saving and sharing programs, and will reinstate a water grants program similar to our previously successful program, Community Water Grants.

The Nationals remain committed to major investment in the re-plumbing of regional Australia to save water and create more options for water-use for the environment, farms and towns.

The Nationals will provide compensation in the form of a structural adjustment package for communities affected by water withdrawals to ensure Basin communities do not bear an unreasonable social and/or economic cost where reforms are imposed in the national interest.

Contemporary urban and suburban households recognise the need for water conservation and water-saving devices, such as shower heads or slow drip watering systems. However, some still have a traditional view of water as a free and endless resource.

Campaigns to encourage better water practices around the home are valuable in changing daily habits and views about water as a resource. The Nationals maintain that current incentives to lower water usage need to be enhanced.

Support for infrastructure

The Nationals will invest in a re-plumbing of regional Australia. We recognise that what is needed is a once-in-a-century investment to improve the water-efficiency of our farms and regional water supplies.

The Nationals will work with farmers and local communities to invest in long-term water infrastructure on farms where ageing infrastructure needs to be upgraded. We also realise that the best advocates for sustainable water use on-farm are the landowners themselves who have the most to gain from using water efficiently.

The Nationals will continue to work with local communities to set targets for water to be saved from on-farm and off-farm infrastructure projects to achieve irrigation efficiencies.

The Nationals will also unfreeze the funds set aside as part of the \$10 billion National Plan for Water Security for infrastructure. Farmers are willing to make savings and to share water with the environment, but they need, and are entitled to, support.

The Nationals will reintroduce full tax deductibility for water infrastructure expenses in the financial year following that in which the cost was incurred.

We will support the construction of new dams in regional Australia to underpin the future economic development of new areas, through providing secure and reliable water supplies for agriculture, mining, manufacturing and towns, and to provide further flood mitigation capacity where appropriate.

The Murray-Darling Basin Plan

We will adopt all 21 recommendations of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Regional Australia's inquiry into the impact of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan and deliver a Murray Darling Plan that is clear as to the environmental outcomes being targeted; and supports targeted investment in irrigation infrastructure to deliver water savings co-ordinated with targeted water buy backs.

The Nationals will ensure that Sustainable Diversion Limits take proper account of social and economic considerations. The Nationals believe the wellbeing of communities and the rivers that nourish them is paramount.

The Nationals in government will address the socio-economic challenges faced by communities reliant on irrigation. The Nationals will introduce Community Impact Statements for water purchases to assess their impact on local communities. We will appoint an independent panel of legal experts to formulate specific amendments to the Water Act ensure that the Murray-Darling Basin Authority and the Commonwealth Minister for Water have the discretion to give appropriate weight to economic, social and environmental considerations in order to balance these interests against each other.

The Nationals will not support a referendum on the transfer of powers of the Murray-Darling Basin to the federal government.

Coal seam gas

The Nationals will develop special provisions relating to the development of minerals and petroleum projects as they relate to the principles of the National Water Initiative and we will clarify the circumstances under which clause 34 of the National Water Initiative apply, so that the water quality issues which arise from coal seam gas developments are properly evaluated under national water planning processes.

Flood mitigation

The Nationals will provide increased investment in flood mitigation works to provide greater protection from flooding for regional communities.

We will provide funding to develop state of the art information technology-based early warning systems, to provide more accurate predictions of flood peaks and timing and earlier, more accurate weather forecasts.

We will also provide resources for addressing the inconsistencies in the conditions set out in the various insurance company policies.

Women in Regional Australia

— partners in business, at work, in the community and at home

Whether in the workforce or at home, the more than one-third of Australian women that live outside the major population centres have a key role in securing a prosperous future of regional Australia.

Women make up more than 40% of farm and small business owner and managers. They are integral partners in decision-making and planning and share the triumphs and hardships of living and working in remote, rural and regional Australia.

The Nationals policies address women's interests based on the premise that the difference between regional and urban women in Australia should be related to geography, not disadvantage caused by unequal distribution of resources and services or a lack of opportunities.

The Nationals will strive to achieve fair and equitable outcomes for women in all areas of regional Australia.

Our Plan

Sustainable regional growth

With The Nationals in government, local committees will be set up to identify, obtain and regulate increased regional funding from central sources. The committees will be made up of local leaders from business, community and local government, with each of these Regional Development Australia (RDA) nodes setting the direction for development in the regions.

Women will make up an important part of these groups.

The RDA Offices will work with local government, schools and universities, service organisations, cultural bodies, sporting, business and

community leaders and associations, to assess local needs and to choose from targeted initiatives to support regional growth.

The RDA will provide a filtering mechanism for potential projects brought to the table of state and federal government, which qualify for the broader 'Better Regions Program'.

Healthcare

Health is a major factor in everybody's life and disease doesn't discriminate by gender, culture, religion, age or postcode. Not surprisingly, health concerns are the top item on the political agenda for individuals and families.

The correlation is well known between lower income levels and poorer health outcomes, and that regional Australia contains a disproportional share of electorates with lower average incomes.

In regional Australia communities have been hardest hit by the deteriorating infrastructure and diminished services now afflicting our public health system.

Greater demand on specialist services in regional and rural areas results from an ageing population and higher rates of disease and illness. The emotional strain on families when members are diagnosed with debilitating or life-threatening illnesses is compounded when they have to be separated by distance for treatment.

Problematic access to mental health professionals is also accentuated in regional communities across Australia, and is compounded by the declining support services available for those suffering these distressing illnesses.

The rate of suicide in regional communities mainly affects males and is estimated to be up to double that in metropolitan centres, reflecting

the inadequacies of the government in providing proper services.

In each of these cases, too often women are left to bear the social and economic costs, as well as the impact of other mental health problems prevalent among men in rural settings, including depression, alcohol and drug abuse.

Every woman in Australia, and especially women in regional and rural areas, has the right to expect safe and well resourced maternity services in close proximity to her local community.

There has been a disturbing decline in government provision of maternity units across regional Australia. Again, the social costs for women having to leave their support networks and travel long distances for maternity services must be recognised and addressed as a matter of urgency.

Adequate health services in regional Australia, particularly acute, maternity and mental health services, are inhibited to a large degree by the shortage of health professionals. Local health networks, where local women can have direct input into decision making on the provision of services, will ensure that the health needs of our communities are met.

The Nationals in government will:

- Provide guaranteed service levels for key regional hospitals in fields such as maternity and mental health.
- Provide increased financial support for those doctors providing health services in regional and remote communities.
- Establish a targeted regional health fund to provide funding for new health services.
- Establish Local Hospital Boards for the larger public hospitals and also for groups of smaller hospitals.
- Ensure that regional health targets are built into the Health Care Agreements.
- Provide incentives for more women to undertake study in health care at a regional university.
- Respond to current Midwifery shortages and avoid future shortages by providing adequate levels of funding for university and VET pre-registration and pre-enrolment courses, and especially for clinical placements.

Women in the workforce

Women in regional Australia make significant contributions to the national workforce. Married women have increased their participation from 17% in 1954 to more than 60% today.

However, while many regional women are well qualified they tend to work in lower-skilled and lower paid jobs. Nevertheless, women in regional Australia are at the forefront of developing small businesses, which are complementing the more traditional commercial ventures such as farming.

This contribution by regional business women is estimated to be in the order of \$1.2 billion-a-year.

Employment of women in the trucking industry is already widespread in mining areas, where they enjoy a safer driving record and less wear on vehicles. Given adequate health and safety standards, this is a growing area of employment for women.

The Nationals will also encourage more women to take up pilot licenses.

The Nationals in government will aim for the full and equal participation of women in the paid workforce, by:

- Implementing programs that encourage small business and tourism.
- Encouraging more women to take up apprenticeships, traineeships and to undertake tertiary studies.

Providing special training programs for Indigenous women.

- Supporting education programs and initiatives which give women access to either face-to-face training, or externally provided training using the technological services now available.
- Further enhancing paid maternity, paternity and parental leave, including for the self-employed.
- Providing more childcare places, with priority given to the needs of regional families.
- Working towards pay equality for equal work between women and men.



THE NATIONALS ARE LOCAL CHAMPIONS WHO JOIN TOGETHER TO FORM A NATIONAL TEAM, TO DELIVER FOR THEIR COMMUNITIES, REGIONAL AUSTRALIA AND THE NATION



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