

Evaluation of the AusIndustry Regional Managers Network

Report Summary

Innovation is the key to making Australia more productive and more competitive—it is the key to creating a future that is better than the past. It is this very innovation, the successful utilisation of new ideas, that will help create a better country—a stronger, fairer, and greener nation that is equipped to meet the challenges and grasp the opportunities of the 21st century.

By 2020, the Australian Government wants a national innovation system in which businesses of all sizes and in all sectors embrace innovation as the pathway to greater competitiveness. To achieve this, the Australian Government has implemented a range of programs and policies designed to foster innovation and raise the country's long-term productivity growth. This support is designed to minimise barriers and maximise opportunities for the commercialisation of new ideas and new technologies.

Communities and business in regional and rural Australia often face barriers not faced by those in metropolitan areas. This includes reduced access to communication and transportation networks, markets, staff and potential customers and, importantly, access to services offered by government. The Australian Government has acknowledged the need for intervention in regional areas with the continuous development and implementation of policies aimed at strengthening regional economic and social opportunities. Building an innovative capacity within a region is a long-term proposition that requires a consistent approach coordinated with other key regional stakeholders.

AusIndustry, the principal business program delivery division within the Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research (DIISR), delivers business services designed to build on three key drivers of economic growth—innovation, investment and international competitiveness. As part of its strategy to assist the development of innovative businesses in regional Australia AusIndustry has a network of offices spread throughout regional Australia, the Regional Managers Network. Regional Managers encourage businesses to recognise the importance of innovation as a driver of business growth, and provide access to programs that can help to stimulate activity, collaboration and innovation.

The Regional Managers Network commenced operation in December 2001 and was designed to improve regional accessibility of the then national innovation policy—*Backing Australia's Ability* and to enhance regional awareness of federal government and AusIndustry's programs. The Network consists of 15 offices, with a total of 19 staff.

This summary presents the findings and recommendations arising from an evaluation of the Network conducted from September 2009 – January 2010. The evaluation addressed the Department of Finance and Deregulation's expenditure review principles of *appropriateness, effectiveness, efficiency, integration, performance assessment* and *strategic policy alignment*.

In preparing this report, the Evaluation team undertook comprehensive desktop research and extensive consultations across regional Australia. In addition, an externally conducted survey of 420 businesses in regional Australia was undertaken to determine awareness of, and satisfaction with, the Network.

The evaluation found a clear need for the Australian Government to continue its support in providing awareness of, and access to, federal government programs in regional Australia. The Network provides an important interface between regional businesses and government, with a significant factor in the success of the Network being the ‘face-to-face’ delivery method employed by the Regional Managers. The Network is also helping to increase collaboration within regional communities, facilitating inter-business networks and relationships—a key factor in the promotion and development of innovation.

A survey of regional businesses and stakeholder consultations provided evidence that the Network has been effective in increasing access to AusIndustry and other federal government programs, and has improved the perception of AusIndustry within the regions. Businesses which had contact with a Regional Manager also expressed high levels of satisfaction with the services provided. The Regional Managers are also exceeding the key performance indicators set for the Network.

The evaluation found that rather than an overlap existing between other federal and state and territory government regionally based initiatives, they are complementary to the services offered by the Network. This is evident in the substantial level of collaboration between the Network and other levels of government throughout regional Australia. Regional Managers are also working collaboratively with other regionally based DIISR staff, such as Enterprise Connect. This is achieved through Regional Managers and Enterprise Connect staff working together effectively by cross-referring businesses and undertaking joint marketing, seminars and meetings to promote the services of the department.

The collaborative approach taken by the Regional Managers is helping to ensure the Network is delivered in an efficient manner. Regional Managers actively engage with other regional stakeholders to multiply the ‘effective coverage’ in the regions, and readily employ cross-referrals to ensure the continued customer focused approach is maintained.

The evaluation also examined alternative delivery methods to the Network. It found that Regional Managers are a crucial part of AusIndustry’s communication channel and cannot be adequately replaced by an alternate delivery method, including delivery by another level of government. Regional Managers possess a depth of knowledge on AusIndustry’s programs that focus on helping to achieve DIISR’s core objectives, and this level of knowledge would be difficult to achieve if delivered by another agency or level of government.

The evaluation found that there a number of issues that, once addressed, could improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the Network. This includes standardised and more comprehensive training for Regional Managers on new programs, better access to ICT infrastructure and the introduction of a Client Relationship Management database.

The evaluation found that as a whole, the Regional Managers are highly competent individuals undertaking a diverse and demanding role with limited resources. The Network is providing an important service to businesses in regional Australia and has been effective in achieving its objectives of raising awareness of, and access to, federal government business assistance.

The Regional Managers remain a valuable and important resource of DIISR. Through increased support and recognition, the Network will continue as an effective mechanism for the development of regional businesses, serving to further enhance Australia’s future economic productivity and prosperity.