



REGIONAL
AUSTRALIA
INSTITUTE



REGIONS RISING QUEENSLAND

National Event Series Sponsors



CONFERENCE PROGRAM

Thursday, 19 June 2025
Cairns Convention Centre, Cairns, Qld

ABOUT THE RAI

The Regional Australia Institute (RAI) is the nation's first and only independent think tank dedicated to empowering our regions to thrive.

Through our research, advocacy, capacity-building, membership collective, community engagement and policy work, the RAI actively works to support the prosperity of regional Australia.

Our partnerships with all tiers of government, corporate Australia and local organisations, enable us to advocate for policy solutions aligned to the priorities on the ground.

In 2022, the RAI launched a 10-year plan to guide Australia's regional growth, the Regionalisation Ambition 2032 – A Framework to Rebalance the Nation.

Co-designed with our members, the Ambition states our goal to increase regional Australia's population to 11 million by 2032, and charts 20 targets across five key pillars:

1. Population
2. Jobs & Skills
3. Liveability
4. Productivity & Innovation
5. Sustainability & Resilience

The RAI is a non-partisan, not-for-profit, for-purpose organisation. We were founded in 2011 with seed funding from the Federal Government to capture nuanced data and research from across Australia's diverse regions to inform better policy and decision-making.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

The Regional Australia Institute acknowledges all Traditional Owners throughout Australia and the continuing connections to Country, rivers, land and sea. We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging and extend that respect to all Traditional Custodians of this land.

ABOUT REGIONS RISING

Regions Rising is the RAI's national series of conferences run in regional centres across Australia.

Regions Rising events attract regional, government and industry leaders, policymakers, local organisations, academics and community champions for solutions-focused conversations and ideas-sharing on key topics relevant to the host region and state.

The RAI's events play an important role in bringing regional stakeholders together for networking, collaboration, thought leadership and ideation on a range of issues impacting the regions. They provide a platform for the RAI to share our research and insights to help enhance and grow regional Australia.

The RAI has a diverse annual program of events that includes our National Summit, topic-focused events, webinars, research forums and exclusive member-only events.

REGIONS RISING QLD: EVENT SPONSORS

Thank you to our dedicated supporters and sponsors for your unwavering commitment to empowering regional Australia. Your support is instrumental in making Regions Rising a success and ensuring the future prosperity of our regions.

National Event Series Sponsors



REGIONS RISING QUEENSLAND: EVENT ATTENDEES



CONFERENCE AGENDA

10:00 - 10:05 WELCOME

Emeritus Professor Sandra Harding AO
Board Member, RAI

10:05 - 10:15 WELCOME TO COUNTRY

Gavin Singleton
Project Manager, Dawul Wuru
Aboriginal Corporation

10:15 - 10:35 RAI ADDRESS

Christian Zahra AM FAICD
Chairman, RAI

10:35 - 10:55 KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Lisa Hewitt
State General Manager Qld and
NT, Elders
Q&A – 10 mins

MORNING TEA – 25 MINS

11:20 - 11:55 KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Dennis Fay
Founder, Salty Monkeys
Q&A – 15 mins

11:55 - 12:00 MINISTER ADDRESS

Bree James MP
Assistant Minister for Tourism, Early
Learning, Creative Industries and
Far North Queensland

12:00 - 12:50 LOOKING TO THE FUTURE IN SUSTAINABILITY AND INNOVATION

Facilitator:

Jacinta Reddan
CEO, Advance Cairns

Panellists:

Professor Ian O'Hara
Deputy Dean Faculty of Engineering,
Queensland University of Technology,
Biofutures Industry Envoy

Pat Welch
Senior Director, Northern Australia
Infrastructure Facility (NAIF)

Mark Olsen
CEO, Tourism Tropical North
Queensland

Dr Allan Dale
Professor of Tropical Regional
Development, James Cook University

Q&A – 15 mins

12:50 - 1:20 IN CONVERSATION WITH

Marnie Baker
Board Member, RAI
Q&A – 10 mins

LUNCH – 55 MINS

2:15 - 2:40 KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Chris Cusack
General Manager, nbn Local
Q&A - 10 mins

2:40 - 3:30 REGIONAL ACCESS- TRANSPORT, FREIGHT AND LOGISTICS

Facilitator:

Emeritus Professor Sandra Harding AO
Board Member, RAI

Panellists:

Neil Gardner
Executive Manager, Jet Zero

Richard Stevenson

CEO, Ports North

Richard Barker
CEO, North Queensland Airports

Q&A – 15 mins

3:30 - 4:05 KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Dr Paul E Hardisty
Author, Environmental and
Sustainability Professional
Q&A – 10 mins

4:05 - 4:15 VOTE OF THANKS

Emeritus Professor Sandra Harding AO
Board Member, RAI

4:15 - 4:30 CLOSING REMARKS

Christian Zahra AM FAICD
Chairman, RAI

NETWORKING – 30 MINS

MEET THE SPEAKERS

EMERITUS PROFESSOR SANDRA HARDING AO

Board Member, Regional Australia Institute

Emeritus Professor Sandra Harding AO is a respected leader in regional development and higher education. As former Vice Chancellor of James Cook University, she led campuses across Northern Australia and Singapore. Sandra sits on several national boards, including the RAI, and brings deep expertise in governance and regional policy.



GAVIN SINGLETON

Project Manager, Dawul Wuru Aboriginal Corporation

Gavin Singleton is a Yirrganydji man and Project Manager with Dawul Wuru Aboriginal Corporation. He leads the Yirrganydji Land and Sea Ranger Program and contributes to national and regional advisory groups. Gavin has presented at the UN, TEDx and other global forums, promoting Indigenous leadership in land and sea management.



BREE JAMES MP

Assistant Minister for Tourism, Early Learning, Creative Industries and Far North Queensland

Bree James MP is a long-time Cairns local, business owner and passionate advocate for Barron and Far North Queensland. Committed to improving infrastructure, expanding opportunity and supporting sustainable growth, she brings a strong community voice to Parliament.



LIZ RITCHIE

CEO, Regional Australia Institute

Liz Ritchie's had a lifelong affiliation with the regions, having spent her childhood in Deniliquin, NSW. As RAI CEO, her goal is to empower regions to thrive through leadership, activation and impact. Liz spearheaded the development of the Regionalisation Ambition – A Framework to Rebalance the Nation by ensuring greater equity for regional communities.



LISA HEWITT

State General Manager Qld and NT, Elders

Lisa Hewitt has deep expertise in regional development, agribusiness and community engagement. At Elders Lisa leads teams across northern Australia to support the growth and success of rural and regional industries. She is passionate about strengthening local communities and driving innovation across the agricultural sector.



DENNIS FAY

Founder, Salty Monkeys

Dennis Fay is the founder of Salty Monkeys and a proud Torres Strait Islander. A lifelong waterman and passionate spearfisher, Dennis blends adventure with conservation. From military service to anti-poaching work in Africa, his global journey is rooted in community, sustainability and sharing the cultural values of the Torres Strait.



JACINTA REDDAN

CEO, Advance Cairns

Jacinta Reddan is a passionate advocate for Northern Australia. With over 20 years of experience across the Asia Pacific in communications, government relations and tourism, she brings global insight to regional leadership. Originally from Warrnambool, Jacinta began her career in journalism and remains committed to regional prosperity.



CHRIS CUSACK

General Manager, nbn Local

Chris Cusack has over 15 years of experience in telecommunications and business leadership. He has a strong track record in driving sales, operational efficiency and customer experience across diverse channels. Chris has held senior roles at Telstra and Visionstream, led a major network launch in the Philippines and is passionate about improving connectivity for regional communities.



PAT WELCH

Senior Director, The Northern Australia Infrastructure Facility (NAIF)

Pat Welch is an experienced finance professional. He has held leadership roles at HypoVereinsbank, NAB and ANZ, driving business growth and managing corporate clients. Pat holds an MBA from Melbourne Business School and is a Certified Practising Accountant.



MARK OLSEN

CEO, Tourism Tropical North Queensland

Mark Olsen leads tourism efforts in the Great Barrier Reef and Wet Tropics, promoting sustainable travel and cultural respect through the 'Leave Greater' brand. With a focus on conservation and community, he chairs regional tourism networks and advisory boards, advancing sustainability and Indigenous tourism across state and national platforms.



DR ALLAN DALE

Professor of Tropical Regional Development, James Cook University

Allan Dale is a leading voice on Northern Australia's development who champions regional, Indigenous and environmental priorities. Allan chairs the Rural Economies Centre of Excellence (RECoE), the Reef and Rainforest Research Centre and serves on several boards, supporting strong, sustainable futures for rural communities.



MARNIE BAKER

Board Member, Regional Australia Institute

Marnie Baker is one of Australia's most respected voices on regional development and community-focused banking. Raised on a dairy farm in regional Victoria, Marnie's career took her from grassroots beginnings to leading Bendigo and Adelaide Bank as its first female CEO. Now serving on the Board of the RAI, she continues to champion regional Australia.



PROFESSOR IAN O'HARA

Deputy Dean Faculty of Engineering, Queensland University of Technology, Biofutures Industry Envoy

Professor Ian O'Hara is a leading expert in bioeconomies, biofuels and industrial biotechnology. Ian advises government and industry on bio-based product development. He is also involved in groundbreaking research and consulting globally in the bioeconomy and process engineering.



NEIL GARDNER

Executive Manager, Jet Zero

Neil Gardner is Executive Manager at Jet Zero, bringing over 20 years of experience in commercial strategy, supply chain and project delivery. He has held senior roles at Verbrec, Arrow Energy and Shell across Europe and the Asia Pacific. A long-time leader in clean energy, Neil is a passionate advocate for low-carbon fuels.



RICHARD STEVENSON

CEO, Ports North

Richard Stevenson brings extensive expertise in maritime operations and strategic leadership. He has held senior roles, including General Manager of Operations at Ports North. Richard's career includes service as a Maritime Warfare Officer in the Royal Australian Navy, as well as roles in personnel development and training with UAE Interact.



RICHARD BARKER

CEO, North Queensland Airports (NQA)

Richard Barker is a seasoned executive with extensive experience across the airports, retail and energy sectors. Appointed CEO of NQA in December 2020, he has been on the NQA Board since 2015. Richard served as General Manager of Retail & Commercial at Auckland International Airport, overseeing retail, transport and premium lounge operations.





DR PAUL E HARDISTY

Author, Environmental and Sustainability Professional

Dr Paul E. Hardisty is a globally recognised environmental scientist, engineer and sustainability expert with more than 30 years of experience across industry, government and research. A published author and former CEO of the Australian Institute of Marine Science, Paul is passionate about creating practical solutions for a more sustainable future.



CHRISTIAN ZAHRA AM FAICD

Chairman, Regional Australia Institute

Christian Zahra AM is Chair of the Regional Australia Institute and Principal of Impact Partners Australia. A former federal MP for Gippsland, he has held senior roles in regional and Indigenous development. He was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia in 2018 for his contribution to regional Australia, Indigenous welfare and public service.



RAI MEMBERSHIP

The RAI's members are committed to elevating regional Australia. The RAI collaborates with our members to inform our advocacy, research and policy work to ensure it aligns on key priorities. Together, our collective voice and united influence can have a greater impact on shifting the dial for regional outcomes and communities.

We have three tiers of membership designed to suit the needs of our diverse partners that help shape our regions:



Ideal for national government organisations and large corporates



Designed for state-based corporates, government bodies and universities



For place-based organisations, local governments and RDAs

Benefits of membership

- Support the RAI's vital work as regional Australia's only independent think tank
- Grow the reputation and awareness of your organisation across regional Australia
- Have input into the RAI's advocacy, research and policy work
- Leverage the RAI's brand and national channels to share your stories and initiatives
- Receive free and discounted event tickets to network with other like-minded individuals and organisations
- Exclusive member-only events and workshops, including Ministerial access and Parliamentary events
- Exclusive promotional opportunities, including speaking at events, being featured in case studies, media opportunities, sponsorships, co-branded initiatives and regional profiles on Move To More, our national campaign
- And much more!





REIMAGINE

REGIONS RISING NATIONAL SUMMIT

Reimagine what's possible for
the future of regional Australia

REGISTER NOW



7 - 8 October 2025
Parliament House, Canberra, ACT