

Federal Election 2022

Our regional priorities

For 15 years, the Murray River Group of Councils has been a collective voice for communities along a large stretch of the Murray River border region.

From Yarrawonga to Mildura, and from Wedderburn to Swan Hill, our region covers 21% of Victoria, along 1,100km of the Murray River.

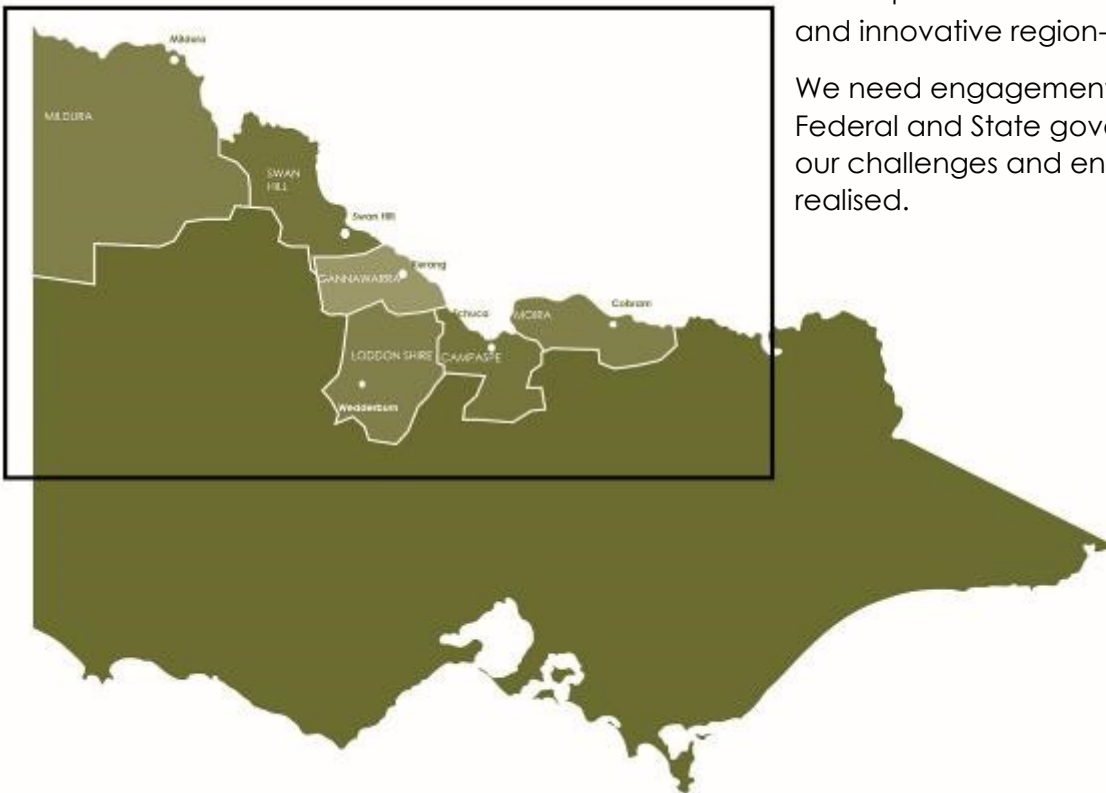
Read more at www.mrgc.com.au/advocacy

With key economic drivers of agriculture and food manufacturing, our region also has burgeoning construction, health and tourism industries, with a total gross regional product of \$10.3 billion (REMPAN 2021).

We face some challenges, particularly in the areas of transport, workforce shortages and the digital connectivity divide.

There are outstanding opportunities for development in areas of renewable energy and innovative region-wide tourism.

We need engagement and investment from Federal and State governments to help tackle our challenges and enable opportunities to be realised.



www.mrgc.com.au



Mildura Rural City Council



SWAN HILL
Rural City Council



GANNAWARRA
Shire Council



LODDON
SHIRE



Campaspe
Shire Council



moira
SHIRE



Tourism infrastructure

Building a river-long adventure trail to invigorate regional tourism

The Murray River Adventure Trail will be a new immersive nature-based experience on the Murray.

Traversing both land and water from Albury to Mildura, this nationally-significant trail will incorporate walking, cycling, kayaking, canoeing and other water transport.

The trail – some 1040km on land and 1390km on water - will be a unique world-class experience for people visiting and living in the Murray region.

Linking historic towns, red-gum forests and stunning wetlands along the Murray River it will align with council tracks and trails strategies, and create a market for private sector investment into new tourism products.

It is estimated that the trail will generate annual output of \$12.8 million and 71 jobs in the Murray region.

The ask:
Commit to funding the Murray River Adventure Trail



We need the Federal Government to commit to future funding for the final two stages of the trail's construction, estimated to be between \$50 million and \$60 million.

Murray Regional Tourism Board is driving this project and construction of stage 1 is funded and underway.

In partnership with local councils along both sides of the Murray, the board has a pending funding application with Regional Development Victoria for the final planning, detailed design and costing work for the remaining sections. Once this is complete, stages 2 and 3 will be ready for major investment.

Learn more -
www.murrayregionaltourism.com.au





Energy

Enabling our region to become a renewable energy powerhouse

The Murray River region is primed to become a renewable energy powerhouse. We have a Mediterranean climate, available land, and strong community support for large scale solar.

Transmission network constraints are restricting investment in large scale solar generation infrastructure.

Across the Murray River Group of Councils region, councils have issued planning approvals for upwards of \$5 billion worth of projects that could generate 4gw of renewable electricity if constraints were removed, with potential for much more.

It is estimated that construction of these projects would generate more than 3200 jobs and \$1 billion in supply chain benefits.

We were thrilled that in 2021, AEMO announced that the Victoria-NSW interconnector would be built through our region, along what is known as the KerangLink.

This essential infrastructure needs to be fast tracked to prevent this once-in-a-lifetime level of investment being lost.

The ask:
**Fund and start early
works for KerangLink
now**



The Federal Government needs to directly and immediately fund early planning, land acquisition and community engagement for the Kerang Link corridor.

These will be some of the most time consuming and complex aspects for this upgrade, as the challenges currently facing the Western Victoria project demonstrate.

Investing now and bringing forward the completion date for KerangLink will secure billions of dollars in private sector investment in our region and strengthen the electricity grid as the country transitions to renewable energy.





Digital connectivity

Eliminating the rural metro digital divide

Reliable and fast internet, and good mobile phone coverage are becoming increasingly essential.

Agriculture and manufacturing sectors in the Murray River Group of Councils region rely on connectivity, as do healthcare providers, emergency services and people living in our rural communities and on farms.

COVID increased our reliance on digital technology for accessing services, for education, to operate our workplaces, for tourism and hospitality operators, to run our community groups and to stay connected to family and friends. This has caused a step change we cannot step back from.

There is a significant and growing gap between access for people in our region, and those in metropolitan areas. Many blackspots remain in our rural areas where agricultural businesses need connectivity the most.

The ask:
**Increase funding to the
Regional Digital Connectivity
and Mobile Black Spot Removal
grants programs**



The Regional Digital Connectivity program has inspired the private sector to implement solutions to improve mobile and internet coverage for their businesses.

The Regional Digital Connectivity and Mobile Black Spot Removal programs have been successful in improving internet connectivity and mobile phone coverage in our region, but more needs to be done.





Agricultural worker reforms

Re-shaping immigration policies to benefit our agriculture and horticulture sectors

The demand for overseas workers in our agriculture and horticulture sectors is higher than ever.

There are well documented worker shortages, issues with housing and stories of exploitation by contractors.

Our Murray River Group of Councils region accounts for a large share of national horticulture production value and, without enough Australian resident workers willing to do seasonal work, we rely heavily on overseas workers (up to 7,500 during peak season).

Current visa arrangements are failing workers, growers and our region.

We have two clear asks: to waive the three-year re-entry ban and to accelerate the implementation of the Ag-Visa.

If implemented, these will help alleviate worker shortages in the Murray River Group of Councils region.

The ask:
Waive the three-year ban on re-entry for more seasonal workers



Overseas workers are excluded from re-applying for an Australian working visa for three years if they breach strict Public Interest Criteria.

Breaches can include working on the wrong visa, or returning home while on a bridging visa. Many of the illegal workers in our region are believed to be living here on bridging visas.

They stay in Australia because if they return home, they cannot re-enter Australia or apply for any visa because the three-year exclusion applies.

We are asking the Federal Government to waive the exclusion period for seasonal workers who hold bridging visas when they return home, if they then apply to return to work under an Agricultural Visa.





Agricultural worker reforms

Re-shaping immigration policies to benefit our agriculture and horticulture sectors

The newly created Agriculture Visa is a step in the right direction, and we were pleased to see the recent signing of Vietnam as a visa program participant.

The Ag Visa offers more flexibility, like no upper age limit and the ability for workers to return home annually.

But we need the Federal Government to implement the new visa program swiftly. Importantly, it also needs to be open to as many countries as possible.

The ask:
Get the Ag Visa program running as soon as possible and open it up to as many countries as we can



This will create a fair opportunity for those who want to come to regional Australia to work in the agriculture and horticultural sectors, and will attract the maximum number of workers willing to return each season.

Ideally, the terms and conditions of all seasonal worker program visas should be consistent and simple to navigate.





Transport

Funding safe and efficient transport for produce to market

Road and rail networks across the Murray River Group of Councils region are in dire need of investment.

We are focussed on projects that make road and rail accessible for the large-scale transport that our growing agriculture and manufacturing sectors demand.

The Federal Government has a role to play in funding these projects, but we also need the Federal Government to advocate for co-operation and support from other levels of government too.

We are calling for:

- A new Swan Hill bridge
- Upgrades to ageing water authority infrastructure
- Completion of the Murray Basin Rail Project

A new Swan Hill bridge

Our six member councils backed the construction of Echuca Moama's new bridge, and are pushing to have the Swan Hill bridge built next.

The ageing single-lane Swan Hill bridge creates a bottleneck for traffic moving through the region, is costing millions in ongoing repairs and is simply unusable for the higher mass and over dimensional vehicles that local and interstate industry now relies on.

The existing 120-year-old lift span bridge carries 3,700 vehicles each day and is located on a key transport route for industry and for local people in New South Wales travelling into Victoria to access services.

The ask:
**Build a new bridge
across the Murray at
Swan Hill**



The Federal Government's \$60 million commitment from 2019 is welcome. Now we need all levels of government to continue working together to complete designs efficiently, and for Federal and State governments to commit to funding the new bridge in forward estimates.





Transport

Funding safe and efficient transport for produce to market

Upgrade ageing water authority infrastructure

The increasing size and mass limits of freight vehicles means that many bridges and culverts across regional Victoria need strengthening.

Higher Mass Limit Vehicles (HMLV) cannot use some key freight transport corridors in the Murray River Groups of Councils region because water authority infrastructure built over irrigation channels need upgrading.

Under the current funding guidelines, water authorities cannot apply for funding to upgrade and strengthen these critical pieces of road infrastructure, nor can they use customer (irrigator) fees to do so.

The ask:
Allow water authorities to apply for funds under the Bridges Renewal Program



We are asking the Federal Government to allow water authorities to apply for funds under the Bridges Renewal Program.

This would enable culvert bridges on important farm to market or farm to factory routes to be upgraded to HMLV specifications, saving time and money across the region currently spent on diversions and delays.





Transport

Funding safe and efficient transport for produce to market

Complete the Murray Basin Rail Project

This project has so far failed our region, despite millions in State and Federal funding.

The project was aimed at shifting freight from road to rail, removing about 20,000 truck trips annually between farms, storage and ports. This would have reduced the impact on our already deteriorating local and state roads, and improved safety for all motorists. It was due to be completed in 2018.

But stage 2 of the project is incomplete, with load limits and speed capability not achieved. In fact, on some sections of the Stage 2 line upgrade, trains are only able to run at 24kph or 40kph, and some train trips take longer than before the works were started.

The ask:
Complete the Murray Basin Rail Project as originally planned



Murray River Group of Council supports the Rail Freight Alliance's position on completion of this project, and we need the Federal Government to continue advocating for and providing funding for this.

For our region, this specifically includes completing Stage 2 of the project as planned, and standardising the lines to Manangatang and Sea Lake.

