

NORTHERN RIVERS JOINT ORGANISATION POSITION PAPER QUEENSLAND NEW SOUTH WALES BORDER RESTRICTIONS

The Northern Rivers Joint Organisation (NRJO) Board Meeting held on 21 August 2020 resolved to establish a Position Paper that sets out recommendations agreed by all six (6) Northern Rivers Council Mayors (resolution number 21082020/15)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In recent years the Northern Rivers has suffered floods, bush fires and now a global pandemic, putting an unparalleled strain on these regional communities.

This strain is now exacerbated by the Queensland border closure which is separating families, denying people the ability to earn a living, stalling education, jeopardizing major projects, and delaying vital medical attention. This creates untold damage to the economy and is interrupting the very fabric of life which supports the intertwined community that straddles the border region.

- NRJO Councils currently have 50 infrastructure and commercial contracts suffering delays as a direct consequence of the border restrictions.
- The Councils have over 200 staff, including critical and essential staff, with either restricted access to their jobs or entirely unable to attend.
- An estimated 15,734 people cross the Queensland/NSW border each day for work. It is estimated 11% of these people are currently not able to attend their jobs. This does not take into account the 1,000 tradespeople currently unable to attend worksites and any other contractors, medical specialists or business owners who cannot continue working.

A summation of the NRJO recommendations;

1. The NRJO request a return to the managed pass system adopted in the initial Queensland / NSW border closure in March-July 2020.
2. These passes be valid for residents north to Brisbane and within New South Wales to incorporate the geographic boundaries of the LGAs of Tweed Shire Council, Byron Shire Council, Ballina Shire Council, Richmond Valley Council, Kyogle Council and Lismore City Council.
3. Queensland provides greater flexibility for exemptions for non-urgent but essential medical needs such as disability support and compassionate grounds for families.
4. That the NRJO request the NSW Premier and NSW Deputy Premier give urgent consideration to NSW committing resources to assist the Queensland Police to operate the border checkpoints.
5. NSW Government establish a grant program proportionately equivalent to the \$45 million Southern Border Small Business Support Grant announced on 22 August 2020.



1 BACKGROUND

The statistics in this paper cover the Local Government Areas of Tweed, Byron, Lismore, Richmond Valley, Ballina and Kyogle, which constitute the Northern Rivers JO. The designated area is home to 252,663 people, supports 90,124 jobs and has an annual economic output of \$27.12 billion.

There has been no community transmission of COVID 19 north of Newcastle since March 2020.

The Border restrictions imposed by the Queensland Government at 1.00am on Saturday August 8 2020 saw all New South Wales residents living outside of a restricted border zone unable to enter Queensland except under exceptional circumstances.

The communities on both sides of the “bubble” are closely connected and highly integrated in all aspects of life with daily border crossings being made for employment, business, health, community, legal services, emergency services, cultural and family support and educational needs, let alone the social interaction through shared sporting fixtures, community and friend groups.

The “bubble” mapping has been done based on post code and, consequently, has led to an arbitrary regional exclusion for many communities and has seen sections of LGA’s segmented and the populations exposed to differing restrictions. Kyogle Council is intersected by the exclusion zone with villages sitting on both sides. This divide is causing significant disruption to the regional economy and personal distress to residents.

2.0 IMPACTS

2.1 COMMUNITY

The border restrictions have had a significant effect on all aspects of society within the Northern Rivers and created a high level of community anxiety, anger and frustration. The many dire health issues that have resulted from the border closure have been well documented and it is important to recognise the issues stretch across the entire community.

- The Lismore City Council launched a survey on the impact of the border restrictions on their local community and received 259 responses in just the first five days. Separation from family, inability to receive essential medical treatment, the uncertainty around income and a decline in mental health were amongst the most common issues raised.
- Social Futures provide essential services to our community including NDIS Local Area Coordination, youth, children and family services, mental health and housing and

homelessness support, have stated that the pandemic, associated physical distancing restrictions and economic impact have exacerbated underlying issues in our communities. In the initial lockdown they recorded an increase in people seeking mental health assistance, particularly younger people, as well as some exacerbated domestic and family violence issues.

The border closure has resulted in 35 of their staff, including two of five executives, being unable to attend their office in Lismore or oversee their programs and staff.

- The issue of family separation will again intensify in September for those NSW families living outside of the “bubble” and whose children attend boarding schools or tertiary institutions in Queensland. They are faced with children returning home for holidays and then being forced to quarantine in Queensland when it is time to return or remaining in the bubble and having no direct family contact for up to six months. Concerns have been widely raised about the effect this may have on the mental health of the students.
- Southern Cross University estimates approximately 1700 health students are affected by the closure in some form, across a number of stages/years of study. Approximately 1035 are directly impacted as, currently, they are unable to complete their prior arranged placement. If placements cannot be secured, these students will not complete their degree, and their graduation will be delayed and therefore their entrance into the Queensland workforce delayed.

2.2 EMPLOYMENT

Based on Journey to Work (2016 Census) data, of the 90,000+ jobs held by people in the NRJO area, 9763 are in Queensland and require the border crossed each day for work. This represents 10.8% of the total regional workforce. A further 5,971 jobs are held by Queenslanders working in NSW.

It is estimated that 1,713 (11%) of these people reside outside of the designated bubble and are, currently, not able to physically attend their jobs on either side of the border. This figure does not include short-term contractors from interstate, medical specialists who have rooms in the Northern Rivers, and other contractors who consider the region part of their business footprint.

This employment impact comes on the back of the overall effects of the COVID pandemic which have been enormously detrimental to the region. It was forecast that the region would lose 7,500 jobs in the June quarter of 2020.

2.21 EMPLOYMENT CASE STUDIES

The following is a summary of the effect on the staffing structures of five essential organisations within the Northern Rivers that have been detrimentally impacted by the border restrictions.

- **Southern Cross University** has 247 staff unable to access their place of work at the Gold Coast Campus.
- **Northern NSW Local Area Health District** currently has 160 staff who cannot attend their workplace in NSW.
- **Tweed Shire Council** has 100 staff who live in Queensland. 18 have been identified as critical and 13 as essential.
- **Byron Shire Council** has 96 employees residing in the border bubble who now have restricted or no access to their regular job location.
- **Social Futures** have 35 staff who live in the border zone and cannot attend their head office in Lismore.

2.3 COUNCIL CONTRACTUAL IMPLICATIONS

It is estimated that at least 50 commercial and capital works contracts being undertaken by NRJO Councils are being adversely affected by the border restrictions. These projects include roads, bridges, water, sewer, storm water, solar projects, playgrounds, servicing of equipment, servicing of IT, and tourism infrastructure.

- Councils are now having to grapple with whether they accept contracts from companies likely to be affected by border restrictions. Potential cross border delays add to the time frame of projects and therefore leading to higher costs.
- Project governance from a NSW Council perspective is impacted if Queensland based employees are not able to be at site which increases risk and lowers productivity. Project management, contract administration and site supervision costs will increase for projects.
 - **Byron Shire Council** estimates a 1% variance in the cost of current projects will equate to an additional \$812,300 of budgetary expense.
 - **Tweed Shire Council** estimates that 21 of their significant contracts from 2019 and 2020 calendar year have been disrupted by delays, increased costs or will need to be rescoped.

- **Richmond Valley Council** is experiencing delays on ten projects or maintenance works as Queensland subcontractors are unable to access the region or alternate suppliers have needed to be found.
- **Ballina Shire Council** has had eight projects delayed by contractors or supply from Queensland being interrupted.
- **Lismore City Council** is experiencing significant disruption to a major legal proceeding.
- **Kyogle Council:** issues have been created by the border bubble encompassing only part of the LGA which has resulted in difficulties for businesses, residents and primary producers operating within their normal parameters.

The border restrictions are creating a significant and financially detrimental effect on the Queensland companies and their employees who are losing this related income. This may have longer term implications for the Queensland economy as local Councils are being forced to find alternatives suppliers and contractors within NSW with whom they may choose to continue to work with beyond the life of the border restrictions.

2.4 COMMERCIAL

The pandemic has already had a significant impact on businesses, with some NRJO regions recording amongst the highest levels of JobKeeper registrations in the nation. These are now being further adversely affected by the border restrictions. Following are some brief snapshots.

CONSTRUCTION:

- Stroud Builders in consultation with Master Builders and local major builders, GJ Gardner, Perry Homes, Coral Homes & Adenbrook Homes, have projected a threat to a combined \$150 million worth of work in the region.
- The Master Builders has stated that 1,000 tradespeople (600 from Gold coast, 400 from the Northern Rivers) are still waiting for a response to their border exemption requests allowing them to continue working. They have also recorded a 35% increase in calls to their mental health service “Mates in Construction”.

AGRICULTURE

- The restrictions are also expected to adversely affect regional cattle sales by approximately 30% with buyers from Southern Queensland unable to attend local sales. Again, this will adversely impact the Queensland economy as new South Wales buyers are not able to access sales to the north of the border.

3.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The NRJO request a return to the managed pass system adopted in the initial Queensland / NSW border closure in March-July 2020. This allowed people with employment or businesses in all sectors of the economy, including contractual or temporary work as well as those undertaking education to cross the border in both directions to ensure the continuation of the Queensland and NSW economies and health systems. The process of passes needing to be regularly updated to ensure validity added a measure of rigour to the system which could again be introduced.
2. These passes be valid for residents north to Brisbane and within New South Wales to incorporate the geographic boundaries of the LGAs of Tweed Shire Council, Byron Shire Council, Ballina Shire Council, Richmond Valley Council, Kyogle Council and Lismore City Council.
3. Queensland provides greater flexibility for exemptions including non-urgent but essential medical needs such as disability support and compassionate grounds for Northern Rivers residents to be with their families in Queensland.
4. That the NRJO request the NSW Premier and NSW Deputy Premier give urgent consideration to NSW committing resources to assist the Queensland Police to operate the border checkpoints.
5. NSW Government establish a grant program proportionately equivalent to the \$45 million Southern Border Small Business Support Grant announced on 22 August 2020, for small businesses in the NRJO regional that have been adversely impacted by the Queensland border restrictions.