

# **PUBLIC SUGGESTION**

The Federal Redistribution 2009  
NSW



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**Public Suggestion Number 115**

**by**

**NSW Farmers Association**

**6 Pages**

1 May 2009

Ms Marie Nelson  
Electoral Commissioner  
Redistribution Committee for New South Wales  
PO Box K406  
**HAYMARKET NSW 1240**

By email: [nsw.redistribution@aec.gov.au](mailto:nsw.redistribution@aec.gov.au)

Dear Ms Nelson

**Re: Redistribution of Federal Electoral Boundaries in New South Wales**

The NSW Farmers' Association (the 'Association') welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission regarding the redistribution of federal electoral boundaries in New South Wales.

Please find attached the Association's submission.

Yours sincerely

Jock Laurie  
**PRESIDENT**



**Submission to the  
Australian Electoral Commission on Redistribution  
of Federal Electoral Boundaries in New South Wales**

**May 2009**

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## 1. Introduction

The NSW Farmers' Association (the 'Association') welcomes the opportunity to comment on the recent announcement on the enrolment quota and the reduction of one seat in NSW's entitlement to 48 seats in the House of Representatives at the next Federal Election.

The Association is Australia's largest state farming organisation representing the interests of the majority of commercial farm operations throughout the farming community in NSW. Through its commercial, policy and apolitical lobbying activities it provides a powerful and positive link between farmers, the Government and the general public. The Association is the key state representative body for both intensive and extensive industries ranging from broad acre, meat, wool and grain producers, to producers in the horticulture, dairy, poultry meat, egg, pork, oyster and goat industries. The Association also represents the interests of rural and regional communities and the important issues associated with natural resource management.

Agriculture is directly responsible for up to 40 per cent of the economic activity across regional and rural NSW. Considering the significant contribution of agriculture to the NSW and Australian economy in general, it is imperative that farmers and other stakeholders in rural and regional NSW are adequately represented in the Commonwealth House of Representatives. Such representation is imperative not only to continue the generation of strong economic activity in the rural and regional communities in NSW but to also have a balanced representative voice at the policy making level.

The Association recognises that the review is in its infancy with a number of future opportunities to comment as proposals are developed. As such, the Association has taken the approach of making general comments outlining initial concerns with any NSW rural and regional boundary changes and to register interest in the issue. Further detail will be provided at a later stage in the review process as the proposals are developed.

## 2. Quota Information

The Association notes the information provided by the Australian Electoral Commission ('AEC') regarding the quota information for NSW. This includes the projected population increase for NSW from 4.53 million in 2009 to 4.75 million in 2012 and the subsequent adjustment in divisional enrolment from 94,353 in 2009 to 98,907 in 2012 given the allocation of 48 Members of the House of Representatives to which NSW is entitled.

The Association also notes the current requirements as outlined in section 66(3) of the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* that as far as practicable, the number of electors enrolled in each Electoral Division in the State would not, at the projection time be less than 96.5% or more than 103.5% of the average divisional enrolment of that State. Based on the projections this is estimated to result in a maximum number of electors for a NSW division in 2012 of 102,369 and a minimum number of electors in a division at 2012 of 95,445.

## 3. Concerns for rural and regional Division boundaries

The Association is very concerned with speculative comments that another NSW rural seat could be removed from Federal Parliament as part of this review process. The Association acknowledges it will be sometime before the actual boundaries for the redistribution occur and the 48 divisions are determined. However the Association would like to highlight from the outset that it is extremely concerned with any proposals that suggest the abolition of current rural and regional based divisions and the subsequent decrease in representation that rural and regional constituents would have at the national level.

The *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* states (s. 66 (3) (b)) that once the equality requirement is into account, the Redistribution Committee 'shall give due consideration, in relation to each Electoral Division' to:

- Any community of interests within the proposed division, including economic, social and regional interests;
- The means of communication and travel within the proposed division; and
- The physical features and area of the proposed division.

The Association requests that these additional considerations be taken into account to ensure that rural and regional constituents have appropriate representation at the federal level.

### ***The Concept of Community of Interest***

Communities are a fundamental building block of rural and regional NSW as they form the core of social and support networks, are the locations of economic relations and they play a major role in the outcomes of their local environment. However despite what might be considered to be natural connection among all rural and regional communities fostered by a common interest in agriculture these communities are not homogenous. There is a wide diversity of agricultural operations, biophysical environments, and social communities within rural and regional NSW. This diversity needs to be considered when developing electoral boundaries.

Compared to other large Divisions such as Kalgoorlie, Lingiari, Grey and Maranoa, where the Division is generally characterised by a large population centre, Divisions in rural and regional NSW will generally include a number of major population centres. The size of electoral divisions and the population centres they encompass gives rise to the possibility of widely disparate views and inconsistent policy expectations within divisions, making it difficult for the elected representatives to truly represent the wider population. Increasing any Division within rural and regional NSW has the propensity to further disassociate communities and further reduce representation.

### ***Communication and travel***

According to the *2006 Proposed Redistribution of New South Wales* report<sup>1</sup> the Redistribution Committee expressed its belief that modern methods of communication and travel "continue to unite communities on either side of the urban/rural divide". While the Association is cognisant of the growing value and benefits in expanded telecommunications capabilities and improved transport infrastructure there remains a divide between rural and metropolitan capabilities and utilisation of these services. Furthermore despite advances in telecommunications it still remains that face to face contact is an essential form of communication.

Creating geographically large Divisions results in representatives in Government and in opposition not being able to cover the area effectively, and the cost of doing so being extremely restrictive and disadvantageous to the constituents. Improving telecommunications and infrastructure will not serve to ameliorate all the problems associated with communication in a larger Division area.

For example, in the division of Parkes the geographical distances between widely scattered communities make it difficult for the elected representatives and their staff to adequately cover the majority of the population base within the division. Following the abolition of Gwydir, Association Member feedback shows that it has been very difficult for them to readily make contact with their elected Member of Parliament despite modern transport and telecommunication facilities. The mobile phones and internet services with the Parkes Division (and other rural and regional areas of NSW) do not operate as effectively as metropolitan areas.

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<sup>1</sup>The *2006 Proposed Redistribution of New South Wales*, op. cit., p. 15.

### ***Divisional Boundaries and Natural Barriers***

The Association recognises that to some extent the 'barrier' aspect of many geographic features has been reduced by improved transport and modern communications technology, however geographical features still play an important defining role in rural and regional NSW. In most instances defining geographical boundaries are also agricultural boundaries with mountain ranges, soil types and climatic zones also defining agricultural activities and rural communities. For example river catchments can determine irrigation prospects and therefore the intensity of agricultural activity and population. Within these natural boundaries constituents can share a common interest promoting the development of the community and a clearer ability for representation.

Natural barriers also assist in the identifiable delineation between areas. Consideration needs to be paid to boundary lines for other population based representative structures to provide for a level of consistency across the state. In NSW rural residents can be a part of Livestock Health and Pest Authorities, Local Government areas, Catchment Management Areas, Local Fire Authorities and a number of other organisations. Consistencies between boundaries assist constituents to more readily identify with their respective representative divisions. An example where inconsistencies have created confusion has been through the recent Exceptional Circumstances process for definition of drought areas. With boundaries being changed and in some cases created with no reflection of other organisational boundaries or existing geographical features it created a large amount of confusion among constituents and concern over the representative nature of these areas.

## **4. Conclusion**

The Association considers the review of Divisions as a possible threat to the continued representation of the interests of rural and regional communities. Over the years rural and regional NSW has lost a number of divisions and with it the ability of rural and regional residents to have an influential role in the development of Australia's policy directions. Agriculture contributes over 40% of the economic activity of NSW, farmers manage over 70% of the State's land mass yet the concerns of rural and regional residents are currently represented by 30% (18% if the predominantly coastal areas are excluded) of the State's elected representatives in the House of Representatives. The Association is concerned that we are increasingly seeing decisions being made regarding food and fibre production and the communities that support this production, by people who have no connection with or understanding of the complexity of the issues. If the trend of abolishing rural and regional divisions continues, it stands to reason that eventually, rural and regional constituents will have minimal capacity to participate in setting the policy direction of Australia.