

# A sea change in migration



The award winning ABC series *SeaChange* has made many people think: "Wouldn't it be nice? Living and working away from our frantic cities."

Despite the good publicity for a different lifestyle, Sydney, Melbourne and other major metropolitan areas continue to grow and regional Australia continues to face a crisis in population, skills and manpower. Australians, it seems, just love their cities.

Even the majority of Australia's 80,000 migrants that arrive each year do not look beyond our major cities. With facilities, job opportunities and existing ethnic community support networks, city life has remained the preferred option for the vast majority of those who come for a new life in Australia.

Since 1995, however, the Federal Government has been trying to encourage migrants to make a sea change and settle in Australia's regional areas. Special concessions available under the Regional Sponsored Migration Scheme have enabled regional businesses to employ 800 skilled migrants on two-year contracts. In addition, 2,000 settlers have entered Australia under the State and Territory nomination scheme, which enables potential migrants to obtain additional points towards their qualifying score if they settle in a regional area.

Now Parliament's Joint Standing Committee on Migration is reviewing the operation of these 'State-specific Migration Mechanisms'. During the past year, it has been travelling to regional areas examining the successes and failures of the Government's special arrangements to encourage migrants to regional Australia.

So far the Migration Committee has held public hearings in Darwin, Kalgoorlie, Townsville, Mount Gambier, Smithton and Hobart. It has heard the views of migration agents, Federal, State, Territory, and Local Government representatives, local communities, regional residents, and the migrants themselves.

While much of the Migration Committee's work is conducted indoors at public hearings, on-site visits help round out the picture. In Smithton the Committee put on boots to see the achievements of migrant dairy farmers in this remote area of North Western Tasmania. On-site, Committee members were able to talk to the farmers and their families, originally from Northern Ireland and the Netherlands, about the practical issues involved in regional migration.

The Migration Committee has found that migrants in the regions are engaged in diverse occupations from creating high tech solutions for the energy industry to water pump distribution, dairy farming and olive growing. Through their different traditions, expertise and much needed skills, migrants are enriching the commercial and social life of regional areas.

By visiting a wide range of localities, the Migration Committee has received a diverse range of comments about the existing migration schemes. Already it has become evident that there is a significant number of people in rural and regional Australia who are enthusiastic and inventive in their activities to attract migrants. Some promote their region through web sites, others arrange for prospective migrants to visit the area, or provide videotape 'tours' of the locality.

A common theme emerging from the hearings is that rural and regional Australia offers not just jobs, but a unique and appealing lifestyle. As Michael Whitehead (Executive Officer, Greater Green Triangle Region Association) told the Committee in Mt Gambier, South Australia: "It is really a sea change, a lifestyle change, for people." The challenge is to ensure that potential migrants know that they have the choice.

The Migration Committee is continuing to hold hearings on its inquiry into State-specific Migration Mechanisms.

#### For more information

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