

December 2023

RURAL WOMEN NEW ZEALAND

Briefing to Incoming Ministers

OVERVIEW

Rural Women New Zealand (RWNZ) is a not-for-profit, member-based organisation that reaches into all rural communities to provide a credible and respected voice on rural environment, health, education, technology, business and social issues. Established in 1925, we have a long and proud history of representing the needs and interests of Aotearoa New Zealand's rural communities and helping them to remain robust and sustainable. Our public policy work provides credible advice to government, partners, and stakeholders on issues that affect people who live in rural New Zealand.

Rural women are the backbone of our rural communities and are vital to ensuring the communities in which they live, work and play are strong and resilient. Our members play a vital role as leaders in their communities and as decision-makers in local, national and international organisations.





ABOUT RWNZ

Rural Women New Zealand, originally known as the Women's Division of the Farmer's Union, was formed in 1925 by a group of farmers' wives to better conditions for rural women and children and to encourage the cooperation of women within farming organisations. In the nearly 100 years since, RWNZ has been at the forefront of rural issues, working to ensure that the voices of New Zealand's rural women and their families are heard.

Services set up included the Bush Nurse and Emergency housekeeping schemes. The bush nurses were later incorporated into the state district nursing service while the homecare scheme endured to become the leading home care provider Access Homehealth. Intensive fundraising at branch and national levels resulted in the endowment of a vast range of philanthropic projects, from buildings, equipment and furnishings for local organisations to major funding for health research.

RWNZ is affiliated to the Associated Country Women of the World and as such upholds all United Nations, International Labour Organisation (ILO), Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and World Health Organisation (WHO) conventions and outcome statements as they relate to women and rural women in particular.

ROLE OF RWNZ

RWNZ strives to ensure that all rural residents, workers and families have equitable access to services, inequalities are addressed by Government, and the wellbeing of rural communities is considered from the beginning of all policy and legislative development.

PRIORITY AREAS

RWNZ has the following five priority areas to improve the health and wellbeing of rural families and whānau, and enhance the resilience and strength of rural communities. We ask that Ministers note our calls for action and work together to deliver on these calls for action over the next term of Government.





HEALTH

Excellent health and wellbeing services are essential for rural communities to thrive. Lack of equitable access to affordable healthcare remains a central issue facing rural women and their families. Currently, many rural New Zealanders are forced to travel significant distances to reach health services often causing serious health and financial consequences for the patient and their family.

Access to mobile health care and online health services remains limited by location, eligibility criteria and, in the case of online services, lack of reliable digital connectivity.

Mental health concerns and suicide rates are alarmingly high in rural New Zealand and access to mental health care is inadequate. The isolation experienced by rural New Zealanders during challenging times and adverse events is a major concern for many rural families.

The lack of adequate maternity services in rural areas places women and their families at risk. The allocation of resources to provide safe, timely and effective maternity care should be available to all mothers regardless of their location. Well-resourced and professionally supported midwives, nurses and care workers are essential for the health and wellbeing of rural communities.

RWNZ' s focus for health and wellbeing is on the issues of equity and access in rural communities.



HEALTH

KEY CALLS FOR GOVERNMENT ACTION

Invest in and maintain access to equitable healthcare for rural communities including:

1. Increased availability of mobile and local health services, and rural health practitioners particularly midwives, nurses and care workers; and
2. Improved accessibility to localised treatment options including initial screening and diagnostics in rural New Zealand.
3. Establish and maintain network connectivity in rural areas to provide stable and affordable digital access to health and wellbeing services.
4. Provide increased resources to improve access by rural New Zealanders to education, treatment and support for mental health; disability support workers; drug and alcohol abuse, aged-care and wellbeing services.
5. Ensure allocation of resources to provide safe, timely and effective maternity care to all mothers regardless of their location.



RURAL CONNECTIVITY AND BUSINESS

Improving digital connection, connectivity and capability to advance rural business and day to day life in rural communities is essential.

We see that the lack of high speed reliable, quality and affordable (“equitable” in line with urban internet costs) telecommunication services in rural New Zealand:

- Hinders rural businesses by leaving them unable to undertake basic tasks online with delayed access to resources and information making them less productive, efficient and competitive;
- Creates critical safety issues in emergency situations such as accidents, crime or adverse weather events. Large areas of rural New Zealand still do not have mobile phone service and are especially vulnerable in a crisis;
- Impedes educational opportunities for rural students relying on internet connectivity; and
- Exacerbates inequity for rural New Zealand in relation to health outcomes and social inclusion.

KEY CALLS FOR GOVERNMENT ACTION

1. Require telecommunication services to provide nationwide access to high speed quality (reliable) and affordable internet connectivity and mobile service.
2. Provide satellite communication coverage for remote rural areas where physical structures to provide internet and mobile services are not viable.
3. Increase rural connectivity and maintain focus on differing needs of rural and remote areas, ie continue to be open/remain flexible about the options offered recognising that one size does not fit all.
4. Support research into new and innovative ways to provide quality, affordable connectivity to rural and remote areas.



ENVIRONMENT AND LAND USE

Finding a balance between urban growth and land use policies which protect our productive land is vital for food production and community resilience. In addition, the quality, availability and equitable access of supply must be a cornerstone of all decisions relating to water use for rural communities.

Discussions regarding environment and land use must include rural communities given that:

- Financially and environmentally sustainable land-based businesses play an important part in protecting our land, water, bio-diversity, and indigenous flora and fauna;
- Maintaining border security is essential to prevent incursions by exotic pests and diseases into our natural environment and avoid the associated potential economic and social impacts; and
- Climate change will affect land use in New Zealand over the coming years and the effects of increasingly volatile weather will significantly impact our rural communities.

KEY CALLS FOR GOVERNMENT ACTION

1. Ensure that economic and environmental land use decisions are made in partnership and consultation with landowners, land users and rural communities.
2. Improve biosecurity protocols to reduce incursions and strengthen monitoring, response and management of any incursions. It is critical to primary industries viability to ensure systems are robust in preventing breaches, especially at the border.
3. Develop strategies for effective water storage and supply systems which ensure high quality, sustainable and equitable water supplies keep pace with the impacts of climate change and population growth.
4. Invest in programmes that support rural communities to address the impacts of climate change.



EDUCATION

RWNZ maintains oversight of the education system from early childhood through to tertiary studies with a strong focus on access to education for those living rurally. This includes associated issues such as school transport, boarding allowances and remote learning.

Rural schools continue to play a vital part in the social cohesion and economic viability of rural communities, however:

- Education for rural students is compromised by distance, isolation, telecommunication limitations and workforce recruitment and retention;
- Awareness of rural needs in decision-making and allocation of resources is limited by a lack of rural representation on school boards and government advisory committees; and
- Economic viability relies on families, whānau and employees being attracted to rural communities.

Rural schools also act as a vital and valuable community hub especially where there is no other community facility for this purpose.

KEY CALLS FOR GOVERNMENT ACTION

1. Ensure rural voices are consulted during the development of education policies, procedures, regulations and delivery for lifelong learning opportunities.
2. Develop and retain a skilled and multi-disciplinary rural education workforce that ensures equitable quality of learning for students through career support and advancement for educators.
3. Ensure rural communities have effective access to all education services (and financial aid) including special needs assistance, early childhood education, school boarding and tertiary study support as well as fit for purpose transport options.
4. Maintain and improve rural schools' access to amenities including reliable and speedy internet connectivity, school property (buildings and facilities), and health and wellbeing services for students, staff, families and whānau.



COMMUNITY AND SOCIAL INCLUSION

New Zealanders working and living in rural communities need to feel safe and secure. Unfortunately, rural communities are increasingly vulnerable due to lack of resources for roading and policing as well as poor workplace practices. Examples include:

- The inconsistent quality and irregular maintenance of rural roads combined with unsafe driving behaviours, poor signage and a diverse range of road users leads to higher rates of serious injuries and fatalities in rural communities; and
- Issues facing rural women experiencing family violence are exacerbated by rural isolation. Rural isolation is an impediment to seeking and receiving urgent help when it is needed.

We also consider access to services and social support are fundamental to attracting and retaining a rural workforce and sustainable communities.

KEY CALLS FOR GOVERNMENT ACTION

1. Improve the safety of rural roads through increased funding for maintenance, driver education and effective road signage; ensure safety is a key consideration for school bus services.
2. Fully resource agencies and communities to protect women and children from violence and provide safe houses and support close to rural communities.
3. Enhance safety and security for rural communities through:
 - Adequate emergency services support for those who live in rural areas including recognition of volunteers;
 - Regulations for use of drones; and
 - A focus on rural workplace safety through awareness initiatives and support for employers and employees.
4. Promote and invest in initiatives that support community inclusion including education and support to prevent digital exclusion as more reliance is placed on digital services.

FIRST 100 DAYS

The strategic intentions articulated in the first one hundred days of government are vital to the ongoing success of Aotearoa New Zealand. The economic, environmental, social and cultural strength of the nation is at its most vulnerable as a new Government settles into its place and we look forward to hearing of the central role rural communities will be playing in those strategic intentions and leadership of Aotearoa New Zealand.

Rural Women New Zealand welcomes the opportunity to meet with you in these first one hundred days.

**WHĀIA TE ITI KAHURANGI KI TE TŪOHU KOE ME HE
MAUNGA TEITEI**

**SEEK THE TREASURE THAT YOU VALUE MOST
DEARLY, IF YOU BOW YOUR HEAD, LET IT BE TO A
LOFTY MOUNTAIN**




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