

BOURKE

UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITY CONDITIONS



Northern
Basin
Review



● Bourke and surrounds, What the research tells us

- Population
- Education
- Employment
- Land use
- Water availability

● Bourke and surrounds, From the locals' point of view

- Looking back
- Managing change
- What is happening

Bourke is largely a grazing community and small regional service centre. Significant changes occurred to the population and employment, mostly between 2001 and 2006. Drought and other factors, such as the closure of the local sale yard, contributed to these changes.

Irrigated agriculture has changed considerably over the past 15 years. Drought, mechanisation, other technology changes and water reforms, including the recovery of water for the environment, have contributed to these changes.

Within the local economy, employment has fallen in the agriculture-related businesses and increased in the government services sector.

More recently, a sense of community rejuvenation has been felt in the town. There has been an increase in younger people returning to Bourke to take over family businesses and an increase in the number of community activities offered. Recent rainfall and good livestock prices coincided with increased confidence for business owners and locals say they are more optimistic about the future.

NORTHERN BASIN



An aerial photograph of Bourke, Australia, showing a mix of residential houses, commercial buildings, and open land. A large orange rounded rectangle is overlaid in the center, containing the title and subtitle. The background shows a town with various buildings, streets, and green spaces, extending to a flat landscape under a clear blue sky.

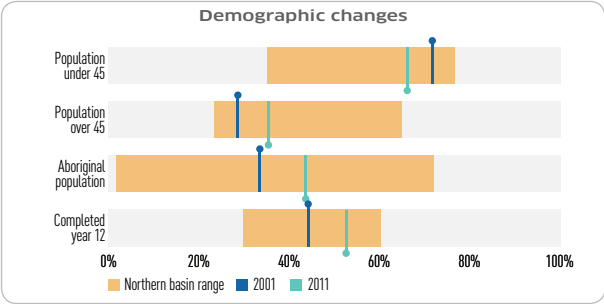
Bourke and surrounds

What the research tells us

POPULATION

| | 2001 | 2006 | 2011 |
|------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|
| Total area population | 2,920 | 2,432 | 2,262 |
| Total town population | 2,556 | 2,145 | 2,046 |

Between 2001 and 2011, the Bourke community population fell by 658 people (23%). During this time, the town population fell by 510 people (20%). Most of the decline occurred between 2001 and 2006, with the rate of change being higher for the farming community. In 2011, 43% of the town of Bourke’s population identified as Aboriginal.



In 2001, 28% of the town population was 45 years or older. This increased to 35% by 2011. The change in population includes a 2% decrease in the number of people aged 45 years and over and a 27% decrease in the number of people under 45. Most of this change occurred between 2001 and 2006.

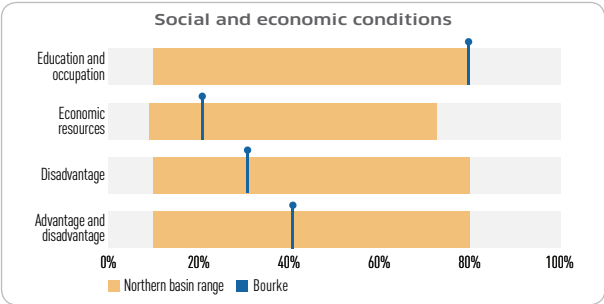
EDUCATION

In 2011, 52% of people in the town (aged over 15) had completed year 12 and 28% had completed some post-school qualifications. This increased from 23% in 2001.

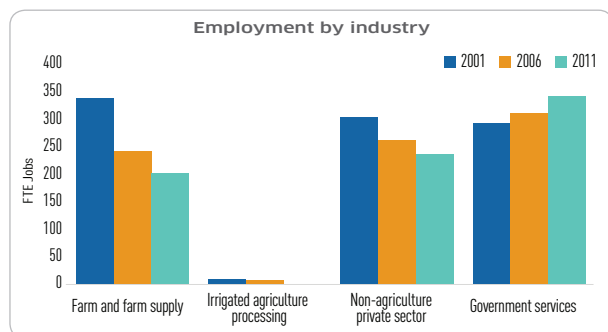
In 2011, Bourke town had an index score of 2 for economic resources, 3 for disadvantage, 4 for advantage and disadvantage, and 8 for education and occupation. For 2006, Bourke town had an index score of 1 for economic resources, 2 for disadvantage, 5

for advantage and disadvantage, and 7 for education and occupation.

General social and economic condition



EMPLOYMENT



In 2011, there were 777 full time equivalent (FTE) jobs in the Bourke community (excluding seasonal workers). This represents a 17% (164 FTE) decrease in employment in the Bourke community over the preceding decade. Most of this decrease occurred between 2001 and 2006.

Unemployment in the town of Bourke was 7% in 2011.

In 2001, the agriculture and agriculture supply, non-agriculture private, and government services sectors were of a similar size. However, by 2011, the government services sector dominated the Bourke economy representing 44% of all jobs. Between 2001 and 2011, employment in the government services sector grew steadily to increase by 17% (49 FTE).

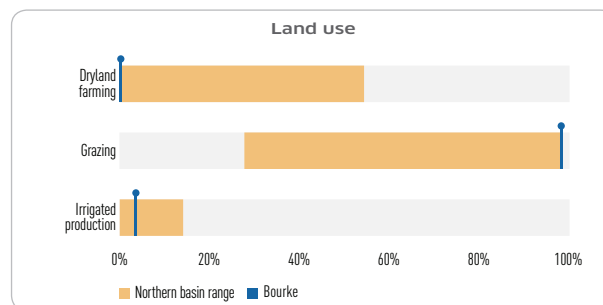
Between 2001 and 2011, employment in the agriculture and agriculture supply sector declined by 40% (126 FTE) and employment in the non-agriculture private sector decreased by 23% (69 FTE). Most of the changes to these sectors occurred between 2001 and 2006.

LAND USE

Land use in the Bourke community is predominantly grazing (97% of the land area). Irrigated production accounts for a maximum of 3% of the land area, with cotton the main irrigated crop when water is available. Between 2001 and 2011, other irrigated crops had included grapes, citrus, nuts and melons.

The irrigated area has varied between 0 and 15,307 hectares. The maximum area

developed for irrigation equates to 5 hectares per person.



IRRIGATION WATER AVAILABILITY

Water for the Bourke community is sourced from the Barwon-Darling and Warrego catchments. The main water source is unregulated surface water.

Between 2001 and 2011, there were a number of changes to water policy. In 2000, an embargo on new irrigation development was implemented. This was followed by the Cap conversion policy, which significantly reduced the potential to develop the water entitlements held at that time and altered the flow conditions which needed to be met in order to trigger access to water.

Upstream irrigation developments have also impacted on the Bourke community. River flows had been reduced to around half of the flow volume that might have been expected without these developments.

Since 2011-12, around 17 GL out of 100 GL of water entitlements held by irrigators has been recovered from the Bourke community through purchase by the Australian Government. This represents a reduction in water available for production of 17%.





Bourke and surrounds

From the locals' point of view

Looking back

The Bourke community is highly dependent on agriculture with the main industries including cotton, citrus, cattle, sheep and irrigated wheat.

From local peoples' perspectives, an average of around 90% of agricultural income comes from grazing and 10% from irrigation.

While Bourke's irrigation development started in the 1970s, it boomed through the 80s and 90s through to 2000. However, since 2000, locals have told us that drought, government water policies,

increased debt levels and mechanisation have slowed agricultural employment.

General Manager of Bourke Shire Council, Ross Earl told us that Bourke took a significant hit during the millennium drought.

'Then there was a significant cut in water allocation through the water sharing plans. We lost a significant amount of population during that time.' Ross Earl

Since the introduction of the Cap on water extractions along the Barwon-Darling, locals said that almost every family-owned irrigation farm along the Barwon-Darling has been sold to a corporate enterprise.

Farmers told us that the changes in water availability around the Cap adjustment reduced the potential development of the entitlements they held by two thirds. There were also changes in the rules around when they could and couldn't turn on their pumps to irrigate crops.

Some farmers said they purchased additional water licences after the first water cuts, but the second round of changes left them with the same level of debt and no buyers for their remaining licences.

Some locals say banks have not been as willing to lend money to people for irrigation – due to uncertainty, security, and confidence around water policy.

Local pharmacist Peter Crothers owns the only chemist in Bourke. He says the state government water sharing plans had a significant impact on the mental health of people in Bourke. Peter is concerned that many decisions that affect Bourke are made elsewhere and the people of Bourke deserve to be consulted.

With the closure of local saleyards, livestock are now sold at Dubbo, Forbes, Gunnedah

and on occasions in Queensland. Some graziers also sell through online selling centre AuctionsPlus.

Locals told us that the sale of Toorale to the NSW Government meant that seasonal and contract work were completely lost after having been reduced considerably since 2001.

We have been told that with many properties changing hands to people outside the region, the number of local council rate notices being sent out of the Bourke Shire is approaching 50%. This means local properties are increasingly being left with no people living on them.

Managing change – a business owners view

Ben Ritchie has been running Bourke Steel and Hire since 2008. He told us that the NSW water sharing plans and the Basin Plan hit the job market hard in Bourke, with many irrigators and horticultural businesses selling their operations and stripping the town of permanent jobs.

Nowadays, irrigation accounts for just 1% of his business turnover. Ben says when he bought the business, it was around 30%. He also told us the local shire council was also a significant client and that their purchases had dropped from 15% to just 5% – due to a drop in government funding.

Like many businesses in Bourke, Ben says business here is dictated by seasonal conditions and government water policy. Depending on the season, his turnover can vary by 50%.

'If everything lines up and the season is good with our graziers, and our irrigators get water – then they have a good season and it flows on through the community.'

Ben Ritchie

With the recent winter rain, Ben said people are now a little more optimistic that Bourke might see a cotton crop this year.

Kidman's Camp, is another local business that has seen many changes over recent years. In the late 1990s, the business grew to meet demands for accommodation that came with the growth in the horticulture industry. During peak season, this business could provide accommodation to up to 300 agricultural workers.

However, with consecutive droughts, the withdrawal of most permanent irrigated crops, technology improvements and the introduction of government water policies, Kidman's Camp now largely relies on tourism and government workers for its clientele.

What is happening now?

The long-term change in farming enterprises has affected the demand for supplies and

services within the agricultural sector at Bourke.

Greg Seiler, from Landmark Walsh Hughes told us that his staff numbers have dropped over the last 13 years, from 10 to 6 employees. Business turnover can vary by 50% per annum.

Greg says to succeed in a business that has significant external pressures, you have to constantly look for new opportunities and diversify.

'You need to evolve and move with the times, or you won't be in business.'

Greg Seiler

'This year alone, our water trading has made up to 10% of our gross profits. With the way the dynamics are changing with water licences, it has opened up a new avenue to create another source of income for our business.

Bourke has lost a number of professionals who have sought out job opportunities in larger centres when their children reach high school. Many farmers send their high school-aged children away to boarding schools.

There is no longer an accountant, solicitor or agribusiness bank manager in Bourke. Before this latest drought, there were 6 planes to service aerial spraying needs. Now that service comes from Moree.

Local business leaders in Bourke say bigger irrigation properties were critical to the success of Bourke and kept the local economy ticking over in dry times – as they tended to continue spending, while smaller farms just stopped spending.

There is a growing tendency to purchase larger items for the home outside Bourke, which is consistent with trends elsewhere in retail.

The official unemployment rate in the Bourke Shire is around 7%, but locals think it is much higher. Mechanisation, the loss of cotton chipping and baling jobs has had a significant effect on local employment rates.

Bourke is a centre for government services, and while agriculture is still the biggest driver, tourism is believed to represent around 12% of the local economy. Visitor numbers have quadrupled since the early 1990s and this is partly due to the sealing of the Kidman Way.

Berdina Warne is the owner of Little Birdy Café. She told us that she has a stable local clientele, but is seeing a significant increase in tourism numbers.

‘Council is putting a lot more money into tourism here and tourists are really getting a positive experience and they tend to stay longer.’ Berdina Warne

Staff numbers have increased from 1 to 10 and Berdina has invested more than \$100,000 into her business. She says she feels confident that the next six months will be good.

Like Bourke Steel and Hire, and Little Birdy Café, many local town businesses in Bourke have changed hands recently. Local business leaders say that change has brought new energy to Bourke.

Chair of the Bourke Business Group, David Randall says the business community is keen to re-design the main street and make it a ‘must visit’ destination in Bourke.

Riots in Bourke in the 1990s saw many businesses erect shutters on their windows. In 2014, the local chemist was the first to remove the shutters. Other stores have started to leave the shutters open at night and/or on the weekend.

There is a strong sense of community with many well supported local events including a community market on the river, community balls and picnic race meetings.

Bourke’s Rural Financial Counsellor, John Beer told us that locals are very keen to see the proposed abattoir go ahead with the associated new jobs. John’s phone has been a little quieter over the last few months and that is a good sign that farmers in the area are a little more optimistic about the season ahead.

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GPO Box 1801 Canberra ACT 2601

Phone: (02) 6279 0100

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getinvolved.mdba.gov.au



engagement@mdba.gov.au