

COLLARENEBRI

UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITY CONDITIONS



Northern
Basin
Review



● Collarenebri and surrounds, What the research tells us

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

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

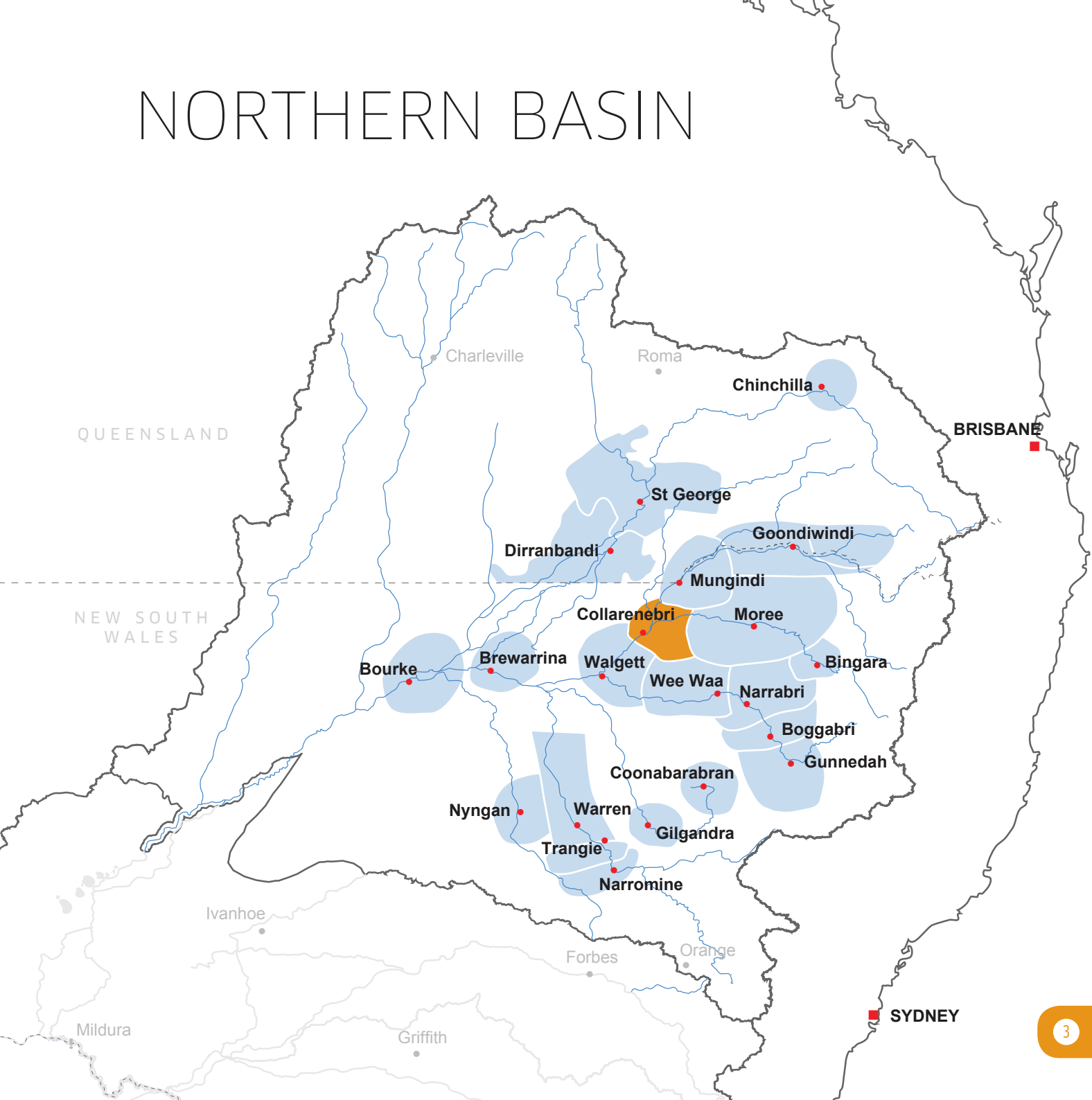
- Looking back
- Managing change
- What is happening

Major changes have affected the small rural community of Collarenebri across the last 15 years. The causes behind these changes include drought, mechanisation, technology improvements and the recovery of water for the environment.

The large fall in local employment from 2001 preceeded the decrease in the community's population, which was greatest between 2006 and 2011. The decrease in the population was most strongly felt in the farming areas of the community.

Multiple measures of social and economic condition indicate the Collarenebri community will be seriously challenged to respond and adapt to large changes. Some of the changes associated with water recovery in the Collarenebri community have had a flow-on effect to Moree-based businesses and the Moree community.

NORTHERN BASIN



Collarenebri and surrounds

What the research tells us



POPULATION

	2001	2006	2011
Total area population	852	735	542
Total town population	520	479	387

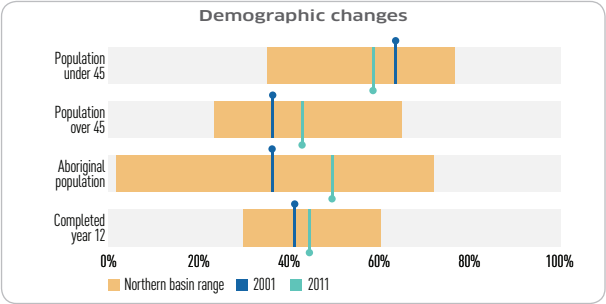
Between 2001 and 2011, the Collarenebri area population fell by 310 people (36%). During this time, the town population fell by 133 people (26%). Most of this change occurred between 2006 and 2011, with the rate of change being greater for the farming part of the community than for the town. In 2011, 49% of Collarenebri’s town population identified as Aboriginal.

EDUCATION

In 2011, 43% of people in the town (aged over 15) had completed year 12 and 20% had completed some post-school qualifications, which was unchanged from 2001.

In 2011, Collarenebri town had index scores of 4 for education and occupation, 1 for disadvantage, 1 for advantage and disadvantage, and 1 for economic resources.

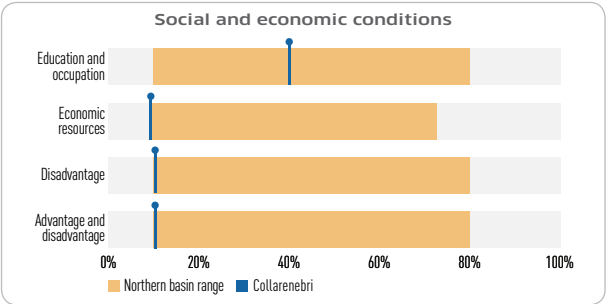
For 2006, Collarenebri town had index scores of 3 for education and occupation,



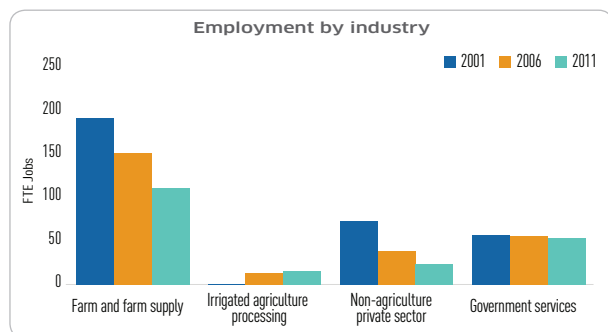
In 2001, 36% of the town population was 45 years or older. This increased to 42% by 2011. The change in population includes a 13% decrease in the number of people aged 45 years or older and a 33% decrease in the number of people under 45.

2 for advantage and disadvantage, 1 for disadvantage and 1 for economic resources.

General social and economic condition



EMPLOYMENT



In 2011, there were 203 full time equivalent (FTE) jobs in the Collarenebri area (excluding seasonal workers). Between 2001 and 2011, there was a 37% (120 FTE) decrease

in full time employment. This change was relatively constant between 2001 and 2011. Unemployment in the town of Collarenebri was 13% in 2011.

The farm and farm supply sector dominates the Collarenebri economy, representing 55% of all jobs in 2011. However, between 2001 and 2011, employment in the agriculture and agriculture supply sector fell by 42% (81 FTE).

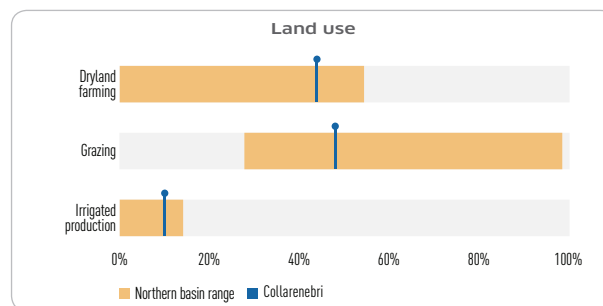
Across the same period, employment in the non-agriculture private sector fell by 68% (50 FTE), nearly all between 2001 and 2006. Employment in the government services sector was fairly stable, with around 55 FTE.

LAND USE

Land use in the Collarenebri community is predominantly dryland grazing (47% of the land area), with 43% of the land area used for dryland farming. The maximum area of land developed for irrigation is 9%, with cotton the main crop grown when water is available. Other irrigated crops grown include sorghum, sunflowers, wheat, mungbeans, chickpeas, turf, pecans and citrus.

The irrigated area has varied between 0 and 17,100 hectares. The maximum area

developed equates to 20 hectares of irrigated area per person.



IRRIGATION WATER AVAILABILITY

Water in the Collarenebri area is sourced from the Barwon-Darling and Gwydir catchments. The water sources are regulated and unregulated surface water. In 2004, the *Water Sharing Plan for the Gwydir Regulated River* came into force, which reduced the reliability of general security water licences.

Around 46 GL of surface water entitlements are associated with Collarenebri. Since 2008–09, around 30 GL of surface water has been

recovered from the Collarenebri area through purchase by the Australian Government. Most water was purchased in 2009–10. The effect is a reduction in water available for irrigation of approximately 66%.

This is additional to the water previously purchased by the NSW government through the Wetland Recovery Plan, Riverbank Program and the Rivers Environmental Restoration Program. Most of the remaining water licences are for unregulated surface water, a less reliable source than regulated surface water.





Collarenebri and surrounds

From the locals' point of view

Looking back

Collarenebri has long been recorded as a significant site for Aboriginal people living in the area. There are many artifacts and significant sites along the Barwon River. It has a significant Aboriginal population.

Many of the buildings in Collarenebri date back to 1910. Around that time, the sheep industry was significant. Former shearing contractor and local Shire Councillor, Kelly Smith said he had 3 teams (15 men per team) of shearers going for 12 months of the year and 3 teams for 6 months of the year.

In the 1980s, sheep industry heavyweight, Roger Fletcher, from Fletchers' International,

purchased several properties north-west of Collarenebri to expand his operations (up to 120,000 acres). People in Collarenebri said that this took many families out of the town and was a significant event for the district.

But Kelly Smith said the collapse in the Australian Wool Reserve Price Scheme and the introduction of the Keating Government's compulsory 'superannuation guarantee' system was responsible for a significant decline in the wool industry in this area.

Broadacre cropping and the irrigation industry also grew substantially around this time. The cotton industry was a significant

source of jobs, both full-time and seasonal. Many locals and seasonal workers were employed during the cotton growing season and at local gins.

Kelly Smith also ran cotton chipping crews for Colly Farms and says he had up to 200 people on his books at this time. He said that many of those people were Aboriginal.

Ian Ether moved to Collarenebri in the 1980s and bought a farm here. He also set up and still owns a transport and earthmoving business. He said that 'there was as much work as you wanted around Collarenebri during the 1980s and 90s.

'At its peak it was a thriving place. You couldn't get any accommodation in town and people camped everywhere. Now there is hardly anyone in town.' Ian Ether

Colly Farms (owned by Twynam Agricultural Group) was the biggest employer around the district with up to 30 families living on the properties.

At this time, Ian Ether said more than half his transport and earthmoving business was dedicated to Colly Farms – carting cotton off the paddocks, grain to silos and gravel and infrastructure works.

In 2004, the water sharing plan for the Gwydir Regulated River came into place. Locals say

this government intervention slowed the development of the irrigation industry.

Then, in 2009, the Twynam Agricultural Group (the owner of Colly Farms) sold its water licences back to the Australian Government for a reported \$300 million and ran that property as a dryland operation until 2012 when it sold its biggest farm, Collymongle to the Zell family.

Many locals said that this single event, long term drought and the mechanisation of the cotton industry (through the introduction of GM cotton and round balers) are responsible for the dramatic downturn in agricultural jobs in the district.

Since that time, many businesses have closed their doors, including the local newsagent, hardware store, supermarket, service station and haberdashery.

Managing change – a business owner's perspective

Aaron Cochrane bought Colly's Butcher in 2001. Before that, he had worked there for 5 years.

At that time, the butchery would buy in about 4 beasts (beef) a week to service the demand for meat in and around Collarenebri. This business would supply 1 beast, a pig and 4 sheep to Colly Farm on a monthly basis.

However, Aaron said that the sale of the water licences on Colly Farms had a dramatic impact on the town and it happened almost overnight.

'When Colly Farms was functioning, there were about 60 workers out there. But since we bought the butchery, the population of Colly has gone from around 900 to just 300. There just wasn't any job opportunities here and families just left town.'

Aaron Cochrane

Now he says he buys in just 1 beast a week, and turnover of this business has dropped by 75%. Aaron and his wife Sharon started a delivery service to surrounding towns in an effort to increase turnover, however, this didn't prove successful.

The Cochranes have sent their eldest boy to boarding school in Warwick. Now that their second child is approaching high school age, they are considering selling the business and moving to Warwick.

'School fees for boarding school are just too much and we would be better off to move to Warwick, find another job, and have our kids live at home with us. We just want to give them a good start.'

Aaron Cochrane

Aaron said that he would have liked to have put on an apprentice butcher, but said

the business would not have been able to support a qualified butcher's wage when the apprenticeship ended.

Jeff Biddle was the workshop manager at Colly Farms from 1997–2000. He said when he worked there it had more than 30 families working on the place. Most of these families sent their children to school at Collarenebri or the nearby village of Rowena.

After spending time away from Collarenebri, Jeff returned in 2011 and with his sons bought the local garage. Biddle's Auto and Ag Supplies is now the only garage in the town.

Since buying the business, there have been 2 floods and 4 years of drought. Jeff said that they 'don't turn a profit as such', but they pay wages for 4 staff.

'We are breaking even. We are still here. We are hoping like everyone else that this rain will turn the economy around. After carrying 4 years of debt, we are hoping that the effort will pay dividends for us.'

Jeff Biddle

Jeff has a 17 year old Aboriginal young person working for him at the garage in the afternoons. He hopes that this year's winter crop at Collarenebri will finally put him in a financial position to offer this young man a mechanical apprenticeship.

Jeff is also looking to add a freight service to his business, as the two currently operating aren't meeting local business owners' needs due to the time they come into town.

Jeff said the affects of the water buy back process has been 'catastrophic' for Collarenebri.

'No-one has got a dollar out here and a lot of businesses have closed. Any infrastructure that has gone is almost impossible to get back.'

'The long term view for Colly is unless something changes it will be, the last one out – turn off the light!' Jeff Biddle

What is happening now?

If you take a drive down the main street of Collarenabri now, there are many vacant buildings. It does have a supermarket, pharmacist, rural supply store, hotel, butcher, garage, and service station.

Collarenebri Central School is the only school in town and it caters for students from kindergarten to Year 12. It has recently received a \$7 million upgrade and now boasts facilities such as a new gymnasium.

Relieving Principal Steve Harper says numbers have dropped significantly in the last few years. Steve said the latest census data collected in August shows projected

enrolments for the 2017 school year will be 79.

'We know that 20 years ago, this school had more than 200 students.'

Steve Harper

Locals here say many families have left town due to limited job opportunities in Collarenebri or a desire to seek out better educational opportunities for their children when they reach high school age.

Agricultural supply company B and W Rural has also seen some significant changes around the town over the last two decades. Like most businesses in Collarenebri, it follows the fortunes of the agricultural community.

B and W Rural Manager Ben Dawson said that 2011 was a fantastic year for the town in terms of agricultural production. However, turnover at B and W Rural dropped by 10% the following year. During the drought years of 2013, 2014 and 2015, turnover dropped by 80%. This year Ben hopes turnover will increase slightly by 20% because of the prospect of a good dryland crop for growers.

'We feel the pinch as much as they do. We are intrinsically linked. Farming will always continue out here in one form or another, but we have been severely hurt by water buybacks. The town is a shell of its former self.'

Ben Dawson

In order to survive out at Collarenebri, B and W Rural has worked to spread its reach. Ben says the client base has now doubled over the last 11 years. They are now servicing clients as far as Lightning Ridge, Walgett and Burren Junction.

Ben Dawson has also taken up the role as President of the local bowling club. It is run by the community and is known as one of the most important meeting places for the locals and visitors. The local Tatts Hotel is the other significant meeting place for people in and around Collarenebri.

However, there is concern about the future of the Bowling Club.

'It's very close to folding. There is a vicious cycle out here. People leave and then businesses providing services leave. Then people don't want to come out here to live because the services aren't here!'
Ben Dawson

Foodtown is now the only supermarket in Collarenebri and it has been owned by Syd Kahn for more than 50 years.

Foodtown employs 3 permanent staff and 2 casual staff. Joan Burrell has worked here for more than 38 years and says staff numbers have remained constant throughout that time.

However, Joan says they lose a significant amount of business due to the government funded bus that takes Collarenebri residents to Moree every Friday.

'Originally it was set up to take people to medical and dental appointments, however, we know people now pay their \$15 and go to Moree to buy their groceries – but what can you do about it?' Joan Burrell

Kelly Smith says he is also concerned about the water quality in the river system these days.

'When Colly Farms was going there was always water coming down the Mehi River. Between here and town, the water is now dirty and you need to go below the weir to see clear water.'

'You very rarely hear of people catching fish, even though we put 24,000 fingerling back into the river when I was on council 6 years ago.' Kelly Smith

With the recent winter rain around Collarenebri, the prospect of a good winter harvest provided some optimism for many living in the area.

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