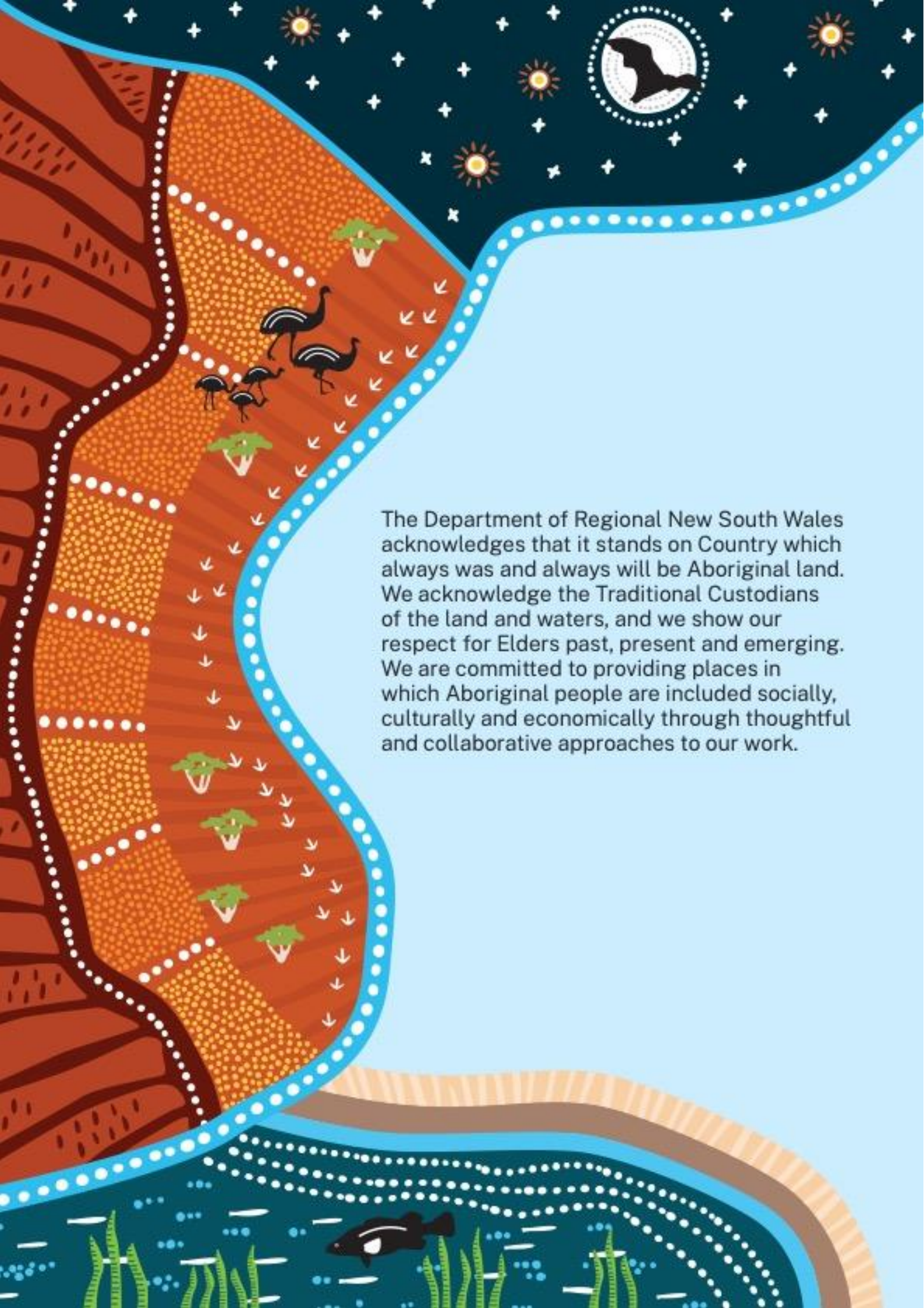


Northern Rivers Regional Economic Development Strategy – 2023 Update





The Department of Regional New South Wales acknowledges that it stands on Country which always was and always will be Aboriginal land. We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land and waters, and we show our respect for Elders past, present and emerging. We are committed to providing places in which Aboriginal people are included socially, culturally and economically through thoughtful and collaborative approaches to our work.

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The Department of Regional NSW would like to acknowledge the significant contribution of many stakeholders in the Northern Rivers region to the development of the 2023 REDS Update, in particular staff from Ballina, Byron, Kyogle, Lismore and Richmond Valley Councils. The Department of Regional NSW also acknowledges the assistance provided by PricewaterhouseCoopers and ProjectsJSA to help deliver the 2023 REDS Update project.

On Country – Artwork by Mumbulla Creative

‘On Country’ captures the many different countries located within the Department of Regional NSW footprint. Only part of the image is shown on the Acknowledgement of Country page. The regions included in this partial image are detailed below.

The Far West region of NSW is represented by red earth plains, mallee scrubs and an abundant emu population. Freshwater countries are referenced by the expansive network of rivers stretching through the regions. The Riverina Murray region is represented by the roots of a river redgum on the banks of a river, and a large Murray Cod can be seen in the river. The night sky features as it plays an important navigational and story-telling role in traditional life.

Cover image: Boulder Beach, Ballina Shire LGA. Ballina Shire Council.

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Table of contents

Table of contents	4
1. Executive summary	5
Changes in the Northern Rivers region since 2018	5
2. About the 2023 REDS Update	8
3. About the Northern Rivers region	9
4. The 2018 Northern Rivers REDS and 2020 Bushfire Addendum	10
5. The big picture: Shocks and trends impacting the Northern Rivers region since 2018	12
Significant events impacting major industries.....	12
Macroeconomic trends shaping the region's future	14
6. Responding to change: Initiatives and investments since 2018	17
Significant investments since 2018	19
7. Northern Rivers 2023 economic snapshot	22
Demographics	22
Housing.....	23
Employment	24
Northern Rivers 2023 engine and emerging industries	26
Northern Rivers 2023 endowments	28
8. Looking ahead: Strategic opportunities for growth, resilience and liveability	29
Opportunities and vulnerabilities in engine and emerging industries	29
Key themes in stakeholder consultation.....	33
Northern Rivers REDS - 2023 Update strategies	33
Key enablers of economic growth	34
9. References	37

1. Executive summary

Changes in the Northern Rivers region since 2018

In 2018, the NSW Government developed Regional Economic Development Strategies (REDS) for 38 Functional Economic Regions (FERs) across regional NSW. Since publication, regional NSW has endured shocks including bushfires, floods, COVID-19 and the mouse plague, and significant new economic opportunities have emerged. The 2023 REDS Update provides an updated evidence base to guide governments in making policy and investment decisions to enhance resilience and drive sustainable, long-term economic growth in regional NSW.

The Northern Rivers has seen significant investment delivered since 2018, with additional projects in the planning or delivery stages



\$313 million invested to complete the major redevelopment of the **Lismore Base Hospital**.



Establishment of the **Richmond Valley Jobs Precinct** will unlock key industrial land supply in Casino and catalyse opportunities in agriculture, manufacturing and renewable energy.



Over \$17 million committed to deliver the **Northern Rivers Rail Trail project**.



Over **\$23 million** to expand the Ballina Byron Gateway Airport.

The Northern Rivers region has recorded population growth and rapidly rising house prices since 2018, alongside a significant increase in job vacancies



+ 2.5% population growth since 2018.



Sustained period of **low housing vacancy rates**, with **median house prices** increasing on average by more than **50%** across the region.



The proportion of the **population over 55 years** has increased **1%** since 2018.



Unemployment across the region have broadly remained stable since 2018, while job vacancies on the North Coast reached an all-time high of **4,595** in 2022.

The region's key industries (including agriculture, manufacturing, tourism and healthcare) continue to drive economic growth in the region



Agriculture

+ **6.5%** Year-on-Year (YoY) growth from 2011-2020

\$ 617 million Gross Value Added (GVA) in 2020

3,971 jobs supported in 2021



Manufacturing

+ **1%** YoY growth from 2011-2020

\$ 614 million GVA in 2020

3,879 jobs supported in 2021



Tourism

+ **4.4%** YoY growth from 2011-2020

\$1.2 billion visitor spend in 2021

14,416 jobs supported in 2021



Healthcare

+ **4.7%** YoY growth from 2011-2020

\$ 981 million GVA in 2020

12,521 jobs supported in 2021

Key themes from local consultation

Stakeholders from the Northern Rivers region have highlighted sustainable growth of their population, housing, achieving lasting recovery and delivering resilience post floods as key priorities for the region.

Resilience in rebuilding



Recent flooding events and other natural disasters, alongside the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, have brought the need to build principles of resilience into policy, programs and project delivery to the forefront of many stakeholders' minds.

Housing availability and affordability



Current shortages and unaffordability will only worsen in the face of a growing population, limited land availability outside of flood zones, and the influx of workers associated with the reconstruction of the region.

Workforce constraints



Skills shortages in important sectors including healthcare, agriculture, tourism and hospitality are presenting key challenges to sustainable growth in key engine industries in the region.

Northern Rivers REDS - 2023 Update strategies and enablers

Strategies	Enablers
<p>Utilise the Northern Rivers Reconstruction Corporation mandate and local government collaboration to develop a more climate resilient economy and provide for future population and economic growth across the region.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prioritise coordinated land use planning and overcoming planning complexities to accelerate the release and development of land for residential, commercial and industrial uses and support the delivery of enabling infrastructure. • Investigate short- and medium-term energy and water infrastructure requirements to support growth in agriculture and manufacturing. • Support councils to use the Connectivity Index Tool following its 2023 release to develop a region-wide digital black spots map, identify major gaps for key industries and businesses in the region, and plan for digital infrastructure delivery. • Adopt a regional approach to economic recovery and reconstruction to build local business and workforce capability and maximise opportunities for local employees, businesses and Aboriginal communities.
<p>Provide better access to jobs and affordable housing for local residents through strategic employment and housing land development.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct a skills demand and local supply analysis to support the Richmond Valley Regional Job Precinct. • Review planning controls to ensure adequate provisions and incentives for housing diversity, including affordable, social housing as well as temporary housing for displaced residents and the (re)construction workforce. • Strategically plan for a pipeline of flood-free employment lands to support local job growth and business expansion.
<p>Develop and support the growth of emerging industries and the visitor economy.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve workforce attraction and retention through a focus on liveability, and work with NSW Government agencies to determine the training needed to develop in-demand skills in the region. • Monitor opportunities for innovation within emerging industries, including the renewable energy sector, and explore incentives to encourage investment attraction in the sector. • Enhance nature-based tourism through further activation of natural, cultural and heritage assets, and enhance collaboration between private land owners and government where natural assets are currently not accessible to the public. • Invest in transport infrastructure to improve connectivity and enhance tourism access, including the adoption of digital technologies to grow visitor experiences.

2. About the 2023 REDS Update

In 2018, the NSW Government and local councils developed a series of Regional Economic Development Strategies (REDS) for 38 Functional Economic Regions (FERs) across regional NSW. FERs are made up of one or more Local Government Areas (LGAs) that work together to create smaller economies with strong economic links.

Supporting the *20-Year Economic Vision for Regional NSW*, the REDS set out a place-based vision and framework for economic development for each FER. The REDS identify each FER's endowments, industry specialisations and key vulnerabilities and opportunities, and outline economic development strategies and actions to leverage these strengths.

Since 2018, regional NSW has endured many challenges including drought, bushfires, floods, COVID-19 and the mouse plague. At the same time a range of broader state-wide trends and actions continue to change the economic landscape across regional NSW, including digital transformation, increased remote working and the shift towards net zero. These challenges and trends have altered the landscape of economic development in many regions and created new opportunities for growth.

The 2023 REDS Update provides an updated evidence base to guide governments in making policy and investment decisions to enhance resilience and drive sustainable, long-term economic growth in regional NSW. The objectives of the update are to:

1. **Highlight progress:** Reflect on significant initiatives and investments that have supported progress against the key strategies and actions in the 2018 REDS.
2. **Capture major changes:** Identify and assess the impacts of major changes to regional economies since 2018, including the effect of recent shocks, such as bushfires, droughts, floods, mouse plagues and the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. **Identify strategic opportunities:** Identify key strategic opportunities and vulnerabilities for engine and emerging industries, as well as any changes to local endowments.
4. **Set the foundation for the future:** Review, affirm and/or adjust the 2018 strategies, including consideration of new strategies to meet emerging priorities, to ensure they remain relevant.
5. **Identify key enablers to guide future action:** Develop a non-exhaustive list of priority enabling actions that will support the 2023 REDS Update strategies.

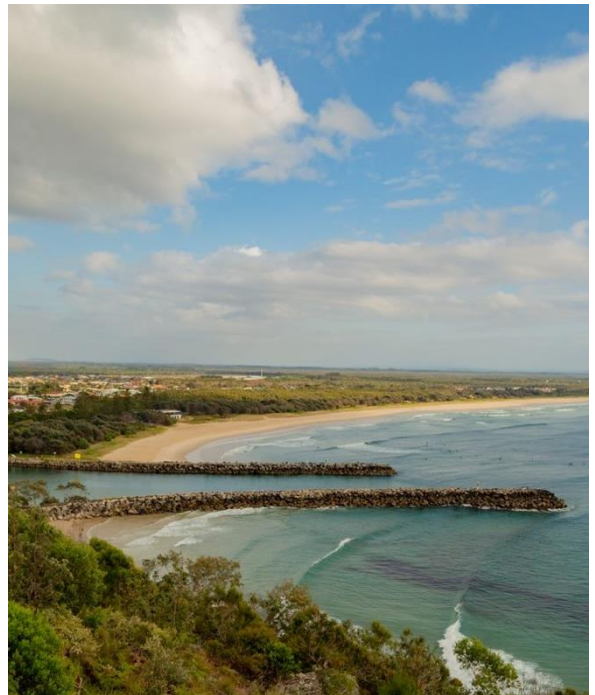


Figure 1: Razorback lookout at Evans Head.
Photo credit: Richmond Valley Council.

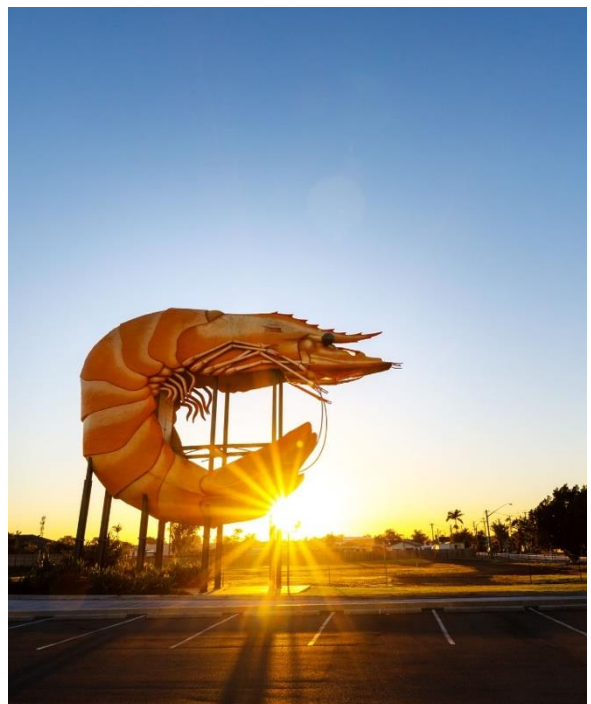


Figure 2: The Big Prawn at sunset, Ballina.
Photo credit: Ballina Shire Council.

3.About the Northern Rivers region

The Northern Rivers FER is situated on the Far North Coast of NSW and borders the state of Queensland. It is composed of the Ballina Shire, Byron Shire, Kyogle, Lismore City, and Richmond Valley Local Government Areas (LGAs). The region is around 650 kilometres north of Sydney and 135 kilometres south of Brisbane, and is well known for its wide variety of landscapes including beaches, rivers, hinterland and rainforests. Key population centres in the region include Ballina, Byron Bay, Casino, Kyogle, Lismore, along with a range of smaller towns and villages.

Total area covered (km ²)	8,982
Population (2021)	159,526
Ballina	46,172
Byron	36,077
Kyogle	9,344
Lismore	44,344
Richmond Valley	23,589
Size of the economy (2020)	\$8.844 billion
Total employment (2021)	69,125

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Estimated Resident Population (2021), REMPLAN (2020), ABS Census (2021).








Figure 3: Map of the Northern Rivers Functional Economic Region.

4. The 2018 Northern Rivers REDS and 2020 Bushfire Addendum





In the 2018 REDS, the region was actively pursuing growth in its key industry specialisations, in particular tourism and agriculture. Endowments recognised in the document spanned natural, social and infrastructure assets.

2018 Northern Rivers strategies

	Develop 'engines of growth' through better connections to external markets.
	Grow tourism opportunities across the region.
	Foster the development of emerging industries and specialisations.
	Develop the services precincts of the region through new approaches to partnership.
	<p>In addition to the core strategies articulated in the Northern Rivers REDS, the 2020 Northern Rivers Bushfire Addendum set out a series of 18 additional short, medium, and long-term priorities focused on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recovery - overcoming direct and indirect damage caused by the bushfires sustained by the agriculture, forestry and tourism sectors. • Resilience - pursuing growth and diversification opportunities that can help to deliver, as part of the recovery from the fires, improvement to the region's economic and community resilience.



















2018 Northern Rivers specialisations

In 2018, four main specialisations were identified for the Northern Rivers region, based on analysis of employment concentrations across all industries. These specialisations are outlined below.

	Tourism
	Healthcare and social services
	Agriculture, forestry, and fishing
	Manufacturing

2018 Northern Rivers endowments

The Northern Rivers is home to a wealth of physical, institutional, built and human endowments. These endowments play a key role in enabling success and growth across the region's industry specialisations.

Endowment	Relevant 2018 specialisation
Riverine and hinterland amenity	
Coastal amenity	
Proximity to South East Queensland	
Arable land	
Ballina Airport and Gold Coast Airport and Precinct	
Pacific Highway, Bruxner Highway, Summerland Way	
Lismore Base Hospital	
North Coast Rail Line	
Private capital equipment	
Local councils and state government agencies	
Clean, green, organic branding	
Industry co-operatives and organisations	
Southern Cross University	
Business incubators and facilitators	
Northern Rivers Joint Organisation of Councils	
Balance of lifestyle, social, environmental and economic opportunities	
Regional Development Australia Northern Rivers	
Cultural & Aboriginal heritage	

5. The big picture: Shocks and trends impacting the Northern Rivers region since 2018



Figure 4: The town of Kyogle. Photo credit: Destination NSW

Significant events impacting major industries

The Northern Rivers region has been challenged by a number of major shocks since 2018. Drought up until 2020 and the major bushfires of the 2019-20 season, significantly impacted key sectors including agriculture. The start of the COVID-19 pandemic and its prolonged impact placed significant strain on many local businesses and catastrophic flood events in 2022 caused widespread damage in the region.

Between 2018 to 2022, the region had 12 disaster declarations^[1] and received \$50.37m^[2] in disaster recovery grants.¹ Building industry and community resilience is a critical priority for the region as it looks to ‘build back better’ after these major shocks.

Drought

The Northern Rivers region suffered a sustained drought between 2018 and early 2020.^[3] By the start of January 2020, Toonumbar Dam in Kyogle was at just 17.2% capacity and inflows in the previous two years were the second lowest on historical record.^[3] Level 2 restrictions were introduced in Lismore, Ballina, Byron and Richmond Valley LGAs in January 2020 as levels in Rocky Creek Dam fell significantly, while Nimbin was on Level 4 restrictions by late 2019.^[4]

The drought had significant implications for the financial viability of farms, with crop production significantly impacted by water shortages, and livestock sectors impacted by a lack of pasture that required producers to bring in feed from as far away as South Australia.^[5]

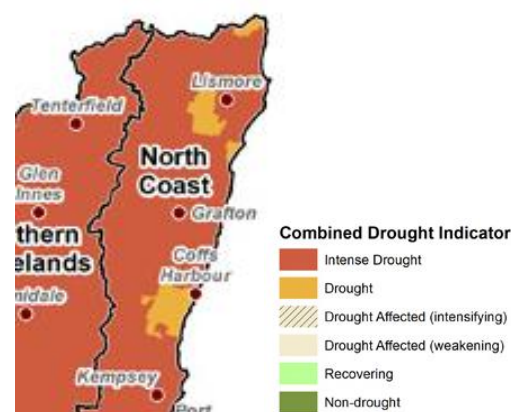


Figure 5: Combined Drought Indicator, 12 months to 31 December 2019 (Department of Primary Industries (DPI), 2022).

¹ This value does not include funding provided for disaster recovery under Natural Disaster Relief and Recovery arrangements.

Bushfires

The 2019-20 bushfires had a significant impact on the Northern Rivers region, with fires burning around 22% of the region's land mass, primarily in the southern half of the Richmond Valley LGA.^[6] Key impacts included:

- 375 properties damaged or destroyed, with the village of Rappville devastated with 21 homes destroyed.^[6]
- Significant damage to timber plantations and Tarmac timber mill destroyed.^[7]
- Substantial impacts on natural amenity and significant down turn in visitor numbers.^[6]
- Significant disruption to agriculture including livestock loss and destruction of equipment and infrastructure.^[8]



■ Bushfire impacted areas

Figure 6: Bushfire impacted areas in the Northern Rivers region.

COVID-19

Following sustained drought and major bushfires, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was significant in the Northern Rivers, with 51% of businesses reporting that COVID-19 negatively affected them.^[9] The key role of tourism as an employer was reflected by the increase in income support recipients, with JobSeeker recipients rising by 73%, while Health Care Card recipients rose by 37% from March to June 2020.^[10]

During the initial acute phase of the pandemic, up to 60% of businesses in the Byron LGA were reliant on Jobkeeper payments to stay afloat, close to the highest percentage recorded across Australia.^[11] Visitor spend in 2021 was \$423 million lower than 2019 levels, reflecting a substantial decrease in overnight and day travel.^[12] Sustained border closures between Queensland and NSW, and restrictions on international visitation represent key contributing factors, given the popularity of the region.

Floods

While parts of the region experienced flooding at various times in 2020 and 2021, and subsequent minor flood events in late 2022, it was the major flood events of late February and March 2022 that caused widespread devastation.

Lismore suffered catastrophic damage when the Wilsons River peaked at 14.4 metres in late February 2022, following a period of intense rains, with the river more than two metres higher than any previous flood on record.^[13] The river rose rapidly overnight, overwhelming the town's levee and leaving many people trapped in their homes, destroying homes and major infrastructure.^[14] There was also major flooding in other parts of the region including Ballina, Broadwater, Casino, Coraki and Woodburn, with major roads cut, rural properties isolated and widespread damage.^[14]

Further heavy rainfalls triggered a second major flooding event in late March 2022, with Lismore again recording major flooding.^[15] Byron Bay was also hit by major flash flooding in late March, after more than 300mm of rain fell in less than 24 hours, with more than a metre of water inundating the town's CBD.^[16]

The damage from these combined flood events was significant, with one third of all flood-related disaster grant claims administered by the Department of Regional NSW in 2022 coming from the Northern Rivers LGAs.^[17]


Estimated damage included:

- 2,500 buildings damaged in Lismore LGA, with 850 severely damaged or destroyed and 2,000 people made homeless. Council assets incurred \$350 million worth of damage with a total estimated rebuild cost exceeding \$1 billion.^{[18][19][20]}
- Byron LGA incurred \$180 million damage to council infrastructure, with more than 1,150 properties damaged.^{[18][21]}
- In the Richmond Valley LGA 450 properties were left uninhabitable, with 800 properties suffering significant damage and repair costs for roads and essential infrastructure exceeding \$150 million.^{[18][22]}
- More than 700 properties impacted in Ballina LGA, with 2,500 people evacuated and catastrophic damage to the houses and facilities of the Aboriginal community on Cabbage Tree Island.^{[18][20][23]}
- In Kyogle LGA council assets incurred \$60 million in damage, with two major bridges washed away and a range of roads cut for extended periods that left many properties isolated.^[24]

There were also substantial impacts on key industry sectors across the economy. Agriculture suffered from widespread crop damage and livestock loss, the food manufacturing sector experienced substantial infrastructure damage along with constrained supply from downstream supply chain impacts, and many retail and hospitality businesses were severely impacted by property damage and extended closures.

Macroeconomic trends shaping the region’s future

Macroeconomic trends related to climate and migration have played a major role in the Northern Rivers region since 2018 and are likely to continue to have a strong influence on its future. While the immediate focus is on long-term recovery from successive natural disasters, trends such as the shift towards net zero and increased remote working will provide opportunities for the region to leverage its competitive advantages.

Trend		Opportunities and risks
 Digital Transformation	<p>Emerging digital technologies with wide-ranging applications across industries can support economic development through increased connectivity. Ensuring digital infrastructure is fit for purpose will be a key enabler for continued economic growth as technology advances, given it supports increased remote working capabilities and innovative business and industrial applications such as agtech.</p> <p>Investment of over \$4 million since 2018 to improve telecommunications infrastructure through the Connecting Country Communities program has included the rollout of 14 new mobile towers in the region. However, further investment will be needed to increase digital capacity and to continue to address blackspots.</p>	<p>Unsuitable internet speeds and geographic location of properties have often been key barriers to technology adoption among agriculture industries.</p> <p>Widespread use of digital platforms by consumers provides opportunities for businesses to grow their access to a wider market via online channels.</p>

Trend	Opportunities and risks	
 <p>Changing Migration Patterns</p>	<p>The COVID-19 pandemic has bolstered the ability of workers to work remotely, with more people taking advantage of regional lifestyle benefits while maintaining metro-based employment. This is evident in the population shift in 2020-21, with regional NSW gaining an additional 26,800 residents while Sydney declined by 5,200.^[25]</p> <p>A growing challenge is that population growth no longer translates into increased labour supply to meet workforce needs in the local economy. The ability for local residents to work in roles based elsewhere has increased labor market competition.</p> <p>Developing and retaining young workers in the region, especially in population serving roles needs to be prioritised. This typically requires high-quality placemaking and amenity^[26], as well as ensuring employment opportunities are competitive with out-of-region offerings.</p>	<p>Population growth creates greater demand for metro-competitive services and infrastructure, which creates future challenges in meeting skills needs for key roles.</p> <p>Sustained population growth, especially given the flood recovery underway, has the potential to exacerbate current housing market challenges.</p>
 <p>Towards Net Zero</p>	<p>Environmental sustainability is a core part of the Northern Rivers regional identity, with the region signalling an intent to play an active role in renewable energy as NSW strives for net zero targets. The North Coast Regional Plan 2041 identifies renewable energy as a focus industry for the upcoming Richmond Valley Regional Job Precinct.^[27]</p> <p>With energy security a critical focus, in particular for the region's large agricultural and manufacturing industries, opportunities exist for the region to support increased renewable energy production, and to support exploration of new technologies, such as bioenergy. The region may also benefit from opportunities in carbon credit markets.</p> <p>The Northern Rivers Net Zero project, driven by Southern Cross University, the Casino Food Co-op and Farming Together aims to bring together local industry to support the development of emissions mitigation strategies.</p>	<p>Supporting opportunities for development of the renewable energy sector will be a key focus for the Richmond Valley Regional Job Precinct, which will catalyse opportunities to create new jobs in the renewable energy sector, among others.</p> <p>Energy intensive industries in the region will benefit from increased energy security as energy supply diversifies.</p>

Trend	Opportunities and risks
<div data-bbox="92 250 172 331" data-label="Image"> </div> <p data-bbox="92 347 258 414">Rising Uncertainty</p> <p data-bbox="363 257 1002 425">The Northern Rivers has been impacted by extreme climatic events since 2018, including drought, bushfires and repeated flood events, which have had a significant impact on local businesses, industries and communities.</p> <p data-bbox="363 443 1066 611">With the frequency and intensity of these events anticipated to increase in coming decades,^[28] a focus is needed on making flood and climate resilience central in the process to replace a range of infrastructure.</p> <p data-bbox="363 629 1066 835">Complementary to the need for economic and infrastructure resilience, there is a need for focus on building community resilience in relation to health and wellbeing. Fatigue from repeated flooding events has impacted mental health in the local community and business confidence.^[17]</p>	<p data-bbox="1129 257 1433 459">Development of new residential and employment lands on flood-resilient sites can help support sustainable growth.</p> <p data-bbox="1129 477 1433 716">Post-flood redevelopment provides an opportunity to build a more resilient region by building back better.</p> <p data-bbox="1129 734 1460 936">Rising uncertainty places upward pressure on inflation, driving up input costs and impacting recovery efforts.</p>



Figure 7: A view looking north across Lismore. Photo credit: Wendy Smith.

6. Responding to change: Initiatives and investments since 2018



Figure 8: A livestock auction underway in the Richmond Valley. Photo credit: Richmond Valley Council.

Since 2018, local councils, the NSW Government and other organisations have delivered new and updated strategic documents and plans that help guide economic and community development in the region. These documents support the development of local enabling actions that contribute towards progress against REDS priorities and strategies.

Strategies and plans	Relevant 2018 strategies
<p>The North Coast Regional Plan 2041 outlines goals focused around ensuring a liveable, sustainable and resilient region, with a productive and connected economy and population, that is able to take advantage of the opportunities associated with recovery, growth and change. The Local Strategic Planning Statements prepared by each council then outline town planning priorities and strategic directions to address planning and development needs in each LGA.</p>	
<p>The Byron Shire Community Strategic Plan (CSP) 2032, Kyogle Community Strategic Plan 2022-2032, Ballina Shire Our Community Our Future CSP 2022-2032, draft Imagine Lismore CSP 2022-2032 CSP and Richmond Valley Made 2030 CSP (new CSP currently under development) outline the priorities for each of the region's communities, and detail goals, strategies and objectives for each council in responding to identified needs over the next 10 year period.</p>	
<p>Each of the LGAs have prepared local economic development strategies to help guide activities and actions to support sustainable growth, including the Kyogle Council Economic Development Policy 2019 - A Guide to Economic Development in the Richmond Valley 2019, Ballina Shire Economic Development Strategy - Opportunity, Innovation and Activation, Enterprising Byron 2025 and Innovate Lismore 2024 - Economic Development Strategy 2019-2024.</p>	

<p>The Northern Rivers Joint Organisation and Regional Development Australia (RDA) Northern Rivers have commissioned the Northern Rivers Employment and Industrial Land Business Survey which will encompass the Ballina, Byron, Clarence Valley, Kyogle, Lismore, Richmond Valley and Tweed LGAs. Several councils have prepared their own strategies to ensure availability of land for commercial and industrial uses, including Byron Shire Council’s Business and Industrial Lands Strategy and Residential Strategy, and Lismore City Council’s Draft Growth and Realignment Strategy.</p>	
<p>The Northern Rivers Joint Organisation Strategic Regional Priorities 2022-2024 outlines a vision for a unified region of well-connected and integrated communities, encompassing a unique balance of place, lifestyle and opportunity. Areas of focus include sustainable energy and water use, protection of the diverse natural environment, and improved community wellbeing.</p>	
<p>The 2019 From Roots to Routes strategy outlines a vision developed collectively by the Northern Rivers Joint Organisation along with a range of stakeholders in the Northern Rivers for enhanced freight connectivity across the region, with a focus on identifying specific investments in freight routes to enable access to external markets and supply chain resilience.</p>	
<p>The North Coast Destination Management Plan (DMP) highlights the need for coordinated and strategic management of tourism for the region. It identifies growth opportunities for the local visitor economy including supporting the development of new tourism products and experiences as well as marketing coordination and effective workforce development initiatives.</p>	
<p>There are a number of LGA specific strategies associated with tourism that seek to highlight priorities, including the Ballina Destination Management Plan (DMP) 2021-2030, the Richmond Valley DMP 2021-2025, the Kyogle Trail Development Strategy 2018 and the Byron Business, Industry and Visitor Economy Strategy (currently under development).</p>	
<p>The Draft Far North Coast Regional Water Strategy sets out the long term water plan for the region, designed to support enhanced community and industry resilience, and support sustainable growth for the region.</p>	



Figure 9: The Quadrangle Precinct, Lismore CBD. Photo credit: Lismore City Council.

Significant investments since 2018

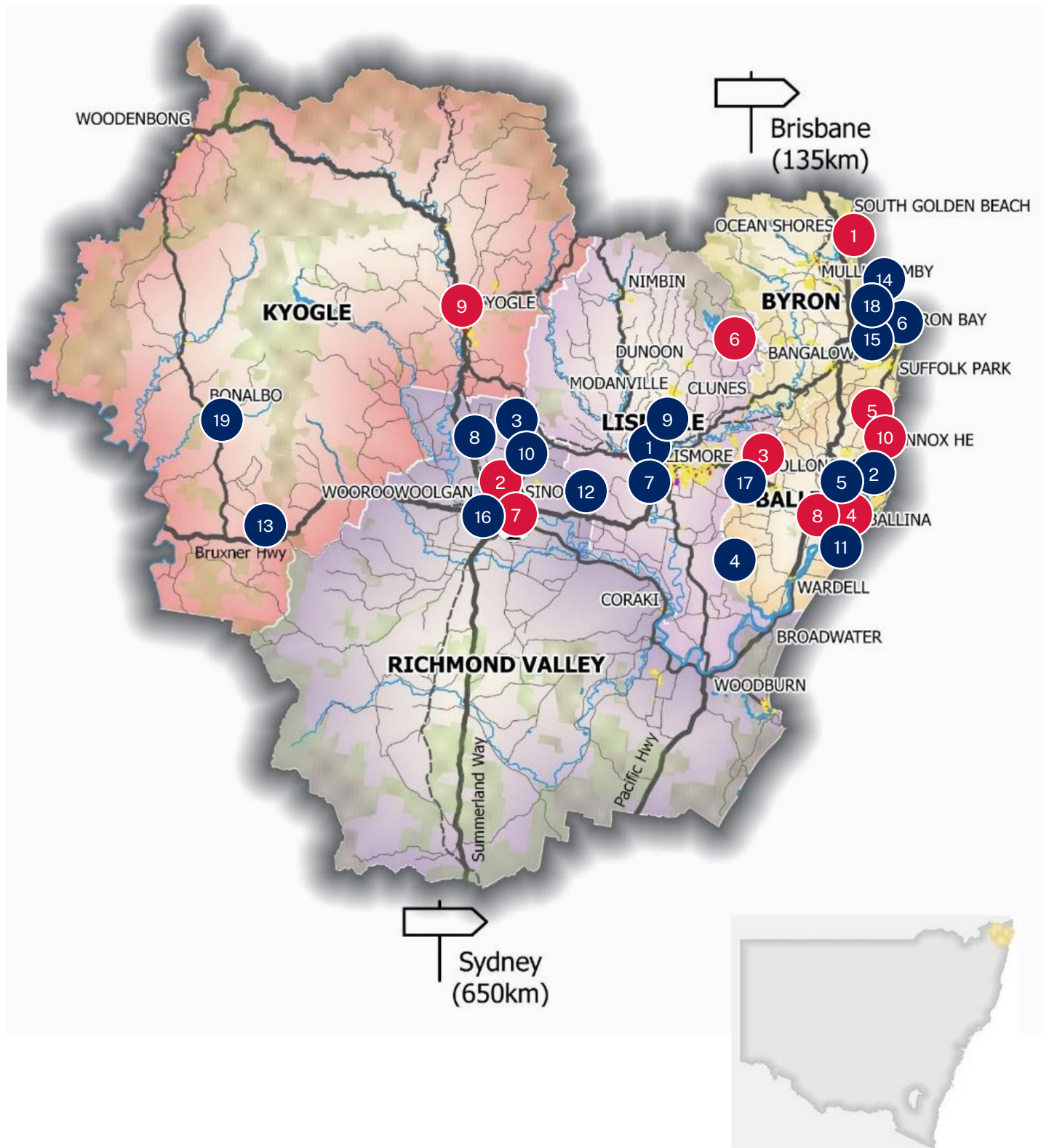






































Figure 10: Significant investments in the Northern Rivers region since 2018.

Since 2018, the region has seen significant local, state and federal funding, as well as private investment. These investments are at varying stages of progress, with some delivered, some underway, and some investments still in the planning stage. Public investments have focused on major health infrastructure upgrades, improving transport infrastructure and supporting expansion of the visitor economy. Grant funding has played a key role in delivery of many of these projects.

Major private investment since 2018















Investment	Estimated total project value	Relevant 2018 strategies
1 North Byron Parklands festival site upgrade	\$42 million	 
2 Casino Meatworks Retail Ready facility ¹	\$6.33 million	 
3 Summerland Farm Alstonville expansion ¹	\$6 million	 
4 Cumulus Visual Effects (Cumulus VFX) facility Ballina ²	>\$2 million	  
5 Tabulam berry packing facility expansion ²	>\$1.5 million	 
6 Carbon sequestration investments on private land	Not available	  
7 St Mary's Catholic College Casino upgrades ¹	\$8.4 million	 
8 Emmanuel Anglican College Ballina upgrades ¹	>\$17 million	 
9 Kyogle Residential Aged Care Facility expansion ¹	\$12 million	 
10 Epiq Marketplace Lennox Head	\$20 million	 

Major public investment since 2018

Investment	Estimated total project value	Relevant 2018 strategies
1 Lismore Base Hospital redevelopment	\$313 million	 
2 Ballina Byron Gateway Airport expansion	\$23 million	  
3 Fixing Country Bridges program – 99 bridge upgrades across the Northern Rivers region	\$63.5 million	  
4 Clarence Way upgrades	\$20 million	  
5 River St Ballina duplication	\$27.5 million	  

¹ Project also supported by grant funding from the Commonwealth Government.

² Project also supported by the NSW Government through the Regional Job Creation Fund

6	Byron Bay Town Centre Bypass	\$24 million	
7	Lismore Airport upgrades	\$5 million	
8	Northern Rivers Livestock Exchange - stage 2	\$7 million	
9	Lismore Employment Lands Project	\$14 million	
10	Casino Industries Activation project	\$10 million	
11	TAFE NSW Byron Bay Connected Learning Centre	\$6.1 million	
12	Northern Rivers Rail Trail - Lismore to Casino	\$17.4 million	
13	Mallangane Observatory	\$2.7 million	
14	North Coast Reflections Holiday Parks	\$13 million	
15	Byron Bay Bioenergy Facility	>\$20 million	
16	Casino Swimming Pool upgrade – stage 1	\$6.7 million	
17	Alstonville and Lennox Head Cultural Centre upgrades	\$14 million	
18	Byron Bay Community Hub	\$5 million	
19	Bonalbo Multi-Purpose Service	Not Available	

Regional grant programs

The region has received \$156.7 million in approved grant funding since 2018. A key program in the region has been the Stronger Country Communities Fund, with \$30.60 million committed to a range of projects including new sports facilities, town centre upgrades and a range of cultural and community facilities and programs.

Grant category	Approved funding
Community	\$60.09 million
Economic	\$46.28 million
Disaster recovery	\$50.37 million

Note: Total grant funding outlined above only includes programs managed by the Department of Regional NSW, accurate as at January 2023.

7. Northern Rivers 2023 economic snapshot

Northern Rivers has recorded steady, consistent rates of population growth since 2011, with a growing proportion in older age cohorts

Although the region has seen consistent population growth since 2011, there is currently a need to focus on developing climate-resilient infrastructure and housing to support recovery from the 2022 floods and accommodate future population growth. Population growth may also increase in the short-term given the need for a significant workforce to support ongoing reconstruction efforts in the region.

Population growth

The Northern Rivers recorded an average annual population growth of rate of 0.75% between 2011 and 2021 (see Figure 11). However, the period between 2018-2021 saw a slightly higher average rate of 0.8%, potentially influenced by COVID-19 related internal migration as workers relocated to the region for lifestyle benefits given increased ability to work remotely.

The long-term impacts of the 2022 floods on population will depend on the speed of housing redevelopment, and whether residents decide to permanently relocate elsewhere.

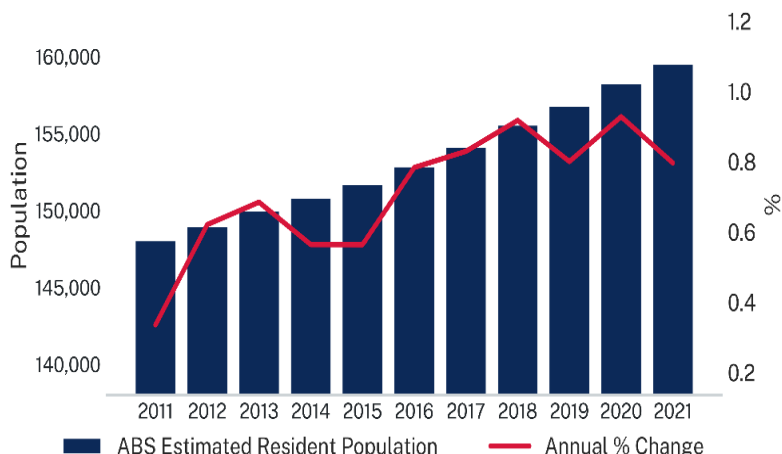


Figure 11: Northern Rivers FER population growth, 2011-2021 (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Estimated Resident Population (ERP), July 2022).

Demographic profile

In 2021, the proportion of the region's population over 55 was 8.2% higher than the NSW average (see Figure 12). This cohort as a proportion of the population continues to grow, rising from 36.6% in 2018 to 37.6% in 2020, which represents a structural demographic challenge with an ageing population.

A challenge will be attracting and retaining sufficient workforce, with a need to focus on training and skill development, so to match the demand for labour from key sectors. Stakeholders also indicated that an increased desire for part-time work rather than full-time employment has been observed in the region, which may create further challenges in maintaining a sufficient working base to meet demand.

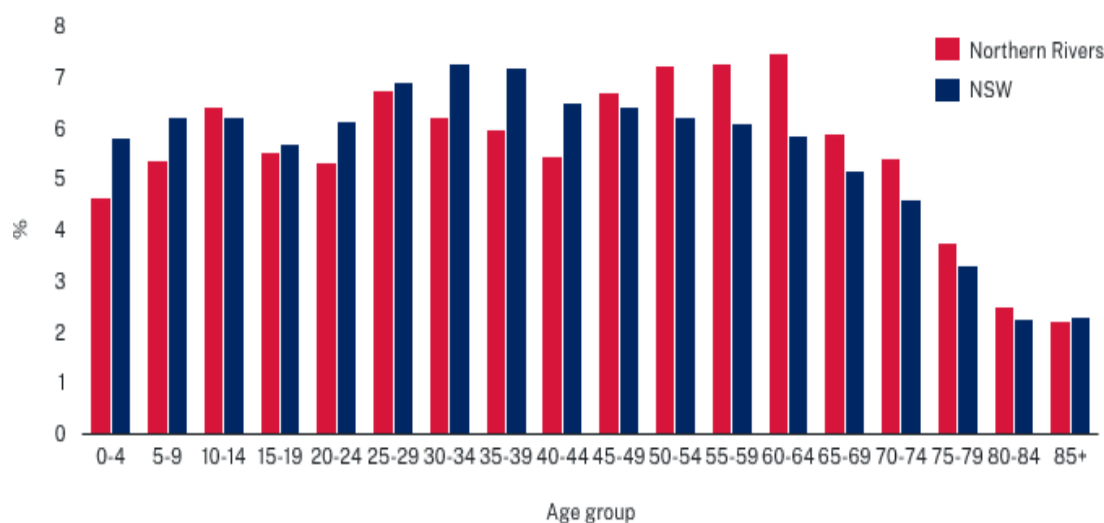


Figure 12: Northern Rivers FER population by age, 2021 (ABS ERP, July 2022).

Major floods and the pandemic have resulted in an acute decline in housing availability and affordability in the region

The region has faced a decline in housing availability and affordability since 2018, which has been compounded by the major impacts of the 2022 floods. With a significant proportion of land within the flood zone, rebuilds and new developments will be challenged by low availability of flood resilient land.

Housing availability

On average, the Northern Rivers has recorded very low residential vacancy rates since 2018. As shown in Figure 13, while there was a peak of 2.7% in April 2020, for most of the period since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, vacancy rates have been well below 2%. While the vacancy rate increased to 4.1% in August 2022, this estimate likely reflects homes made untenable by the major flood events, and therefore is unlikely to represent a reliable estimate of short-term housing availability in the region. The substantial pressure on housing availability is likely to continue for some time, given the time needed to facilitate flood recovery.

While there has been a consistent number of residential building approvals in the region since May 2020, a lack of land availability and lagging land development timelines may become an impediment to overall growth in flood resilient housing stock. In addition, preservation of the unique environment and other biodiversity constraints further limit development opportunities across the region.

Part of the remit of the Northern Rivers Reconstruction Corporation (NRRC) is to support streamlined planning and rezoning processes, so to assist with rapid development of new housing areas across the region as part of the recovery following the 2022 floods. This will be critical to ensuring housing supply can meet the key needs of the existing local community and also to enabling further growth in housing supply to meet future population growth in the region.

Housing affordability

Between June 2018 and June 2022, median house prices in the Ballina LGA increased 52% to \$1,070,000, by 76% in Byron LGA to \$1,600,000, by 36% in Kyogle LGA to \$454,000, by 54% in Lismore to \$640,000, and in Richmond Valley they increased by 38% to \$495,000^[29]. In comparison, NSW (excluding Sydney) increased 72% in the same period^[30]. As at July 2021, the price-to-income ratio in the region was 11.73, significantly higher than the NSW benchmark of 8.12^[29], indicating a critical housing affordability challenge in the region. Investments in social and affordable housing will be critical to ensure lower income households do not become permanently displaced as a result of the 2022 floods.

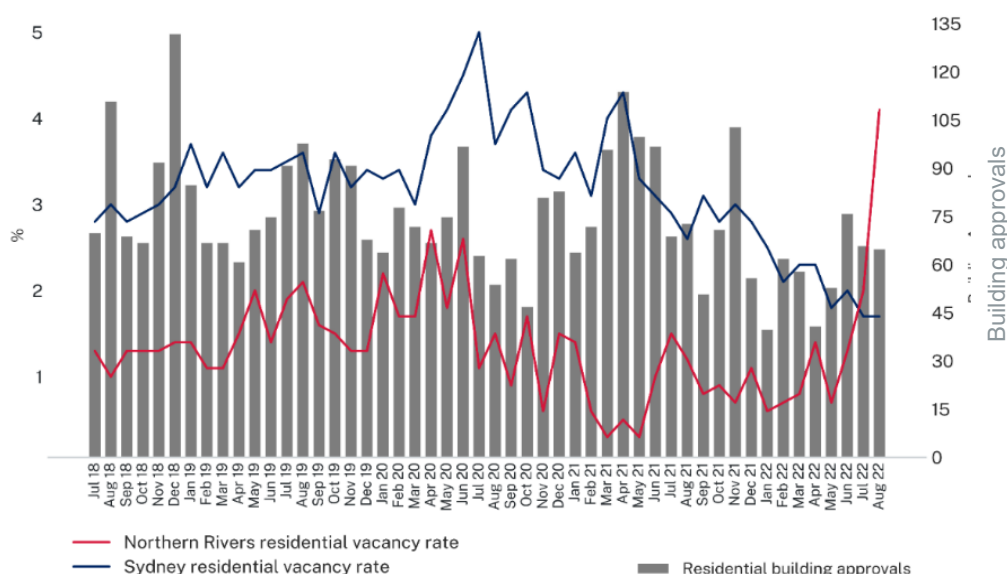


Figure 13: Northern Rivers FER vacancy rate and building approvals, 2018-2022 (Real Estate Institute of NSW (REINSW), 2022).

Note: The Real Estate Institute of NSW (REINSW) vacancy data collection is not aligned with the FER boundary map, resulting in an overlap with other FERs. These results are therefore intended to provide an indication of housing vacancies in the region.

The region has experienced a significant increase in job vacancies since 2018

A constrained labour market has been an issue for the Northern Rivers region since 2018, with job vacancies more than doubling across this period despite major shocks to industry. Skilled workforce attraction and retention initiatives will be critical as the region faces a tightening of the labour market.

Employment

As at June 2022, the Northern Rivers region recorded unemployment rates of 6.0% in Kyogle, 5.9% in Richmond Valley, and 5.8% in Lismore, above the NSW benchmark at 3.3% (see Figure 14). Ballina's unemployment was lower at 2.8% and has widely followed the same trend as the aforementioned regions, remaining relatively stable throughout the pandemic. Byron LGA experienced a spike of unemployment peaking at 6.9% in March 2021, primarily due to the impacts of the COVID-19 lockdowns on its large tourism and hospitality sector, but employment outcomes have since improved with unemployment at 4.4% as at June 2022.

Job vacancies across the broader North Coast region climbed to 4,595 in August 2022, rising significantly from approximately 2,084 in December 2018 (see Figure 15). Occupations with an acute need for workers include medical practitioners and nurses (383 vacancies), carers and aides (449), sales assistants (352), and administrative workers (347), representing a challenge for the region given the need to support key sectors including healthcare, tourism, and hospitality sectors. The region is also facing population growth and an ageing population, both of which bring about increased demand for health and care services.

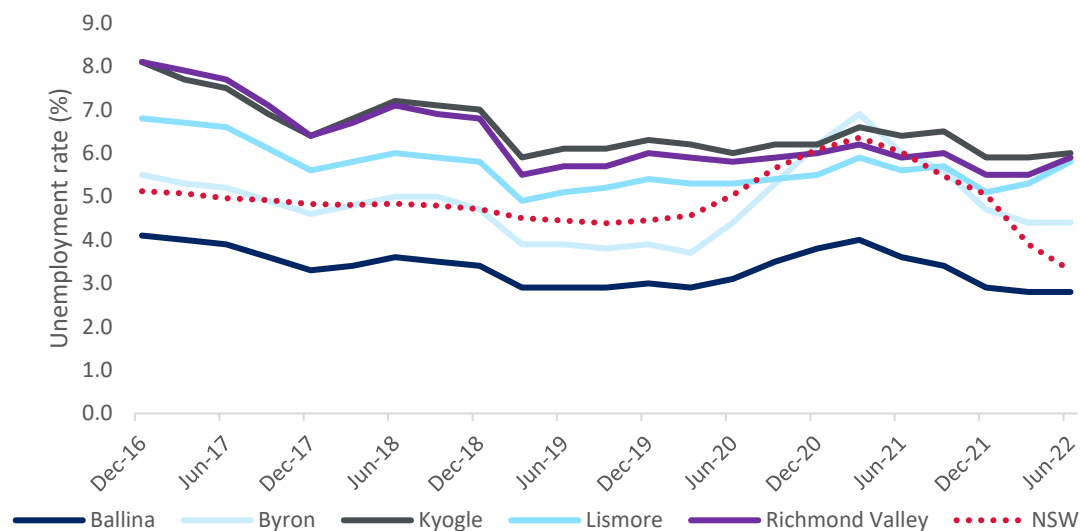


Figure 14: Northern Rivers unemployment rate (%), 2016-2022 (National Skills Commission, 2022; ABS Labour Force, 2022).



Figure 15: Job vacancies, NSW North Coast (2018-2022) (Regional IVI, National Skills Commission, 2022).

Note: The regional IVI – National Skills Commission job vacancy data collection is not aligned with the FER boundary map, resulting in an overlap with other FERs. Job vacancy data only includes online job vacancies. These results are intended to provide an indication of job vacancies in the region.

Aboriginal employment

Between 2011 and 2021, significant improvement has been achieved in employment outcomes for Aboriginal communities in the Northern Rivers region. The Aboriginal unemployment rate has dropped from 23.2% in 2011 to 18.0% in 2016, and then to 10.4% in 2021. However, this rate remains above the whole of NSW Aboriginal unemployment rate of 9.8% and the NSW unemployment rate, highlighting that a key ongoing focus needs to be placed by all stakeholders on maximising opportunities for economic participation and development for the Aboriginal community.

Aboriginal unemployment rate: Northern Rivers	2011	23.2%
	2016	18.0%
	2021	10.4%
NSW Aboriginal unemployment rate	2021	9.8%
NSW unemployment rate	2021	4.9%

Source: ABS Census 2021.



Figure 16: Byron Shire Hinterland. Photo credit: Byron Shire Council.

Northern Rivers 2023 engine and emerging industries

The Northern Rivers region has an \$8.8 billion economy. Despite significant shocks since 2018, the Northern Rivers engine industries have remained a source of strength for the regional economy in driving growth and economic activity. The relative strength of each industry is measured using Location Quotient (LQ) analysis¹ as displayed in Figure 17, where industry size correlates with bubble size.

Engine industries

Agriculture (LQ of 3.61) has continued to be a significant specialisation for the region, generating \$617 million GVA in 2020 and growing on average by 6.5% per year between 2011 and 2020. This outcome was driven largely by strong sub-sector specialisations, including fruit and nut and sugarcane production, followed by sheep, grain, beef and dairy, which generated 28% of the industry's output in 2020. There are also many diverse agricultural enterprises, including regenerative, organic and small scale farms in the region that drive innovation and growth in the sector.

Manufacturing (LQ of 1.16) also stands as a key source of economic output for the region, with a significant GVA of \$614 million in 2020 and recording average growth of 1% per annum between 2011 and 2020, which challenged the state-wide trend of decline in the sector. This specialisation is driven primarily by value-add processing, particularly in meat and dairy products, which continue to represent key strengths, despite challenges associated with the 2022 floods.

Tourism (LQ of 1.37) remains a key source of economic output and major employer in the region. Spending by visitors to the region was \$1.2 billion in 2021, despite significant impacts from natural disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic.^[12]

Healthcare and social assistance (LQ of 1.58) is another core pillar of the regional economy, contributing \$981 million in GVA in 2020, after growing at an annual average rate of 4.7% between 2011 and 2020.

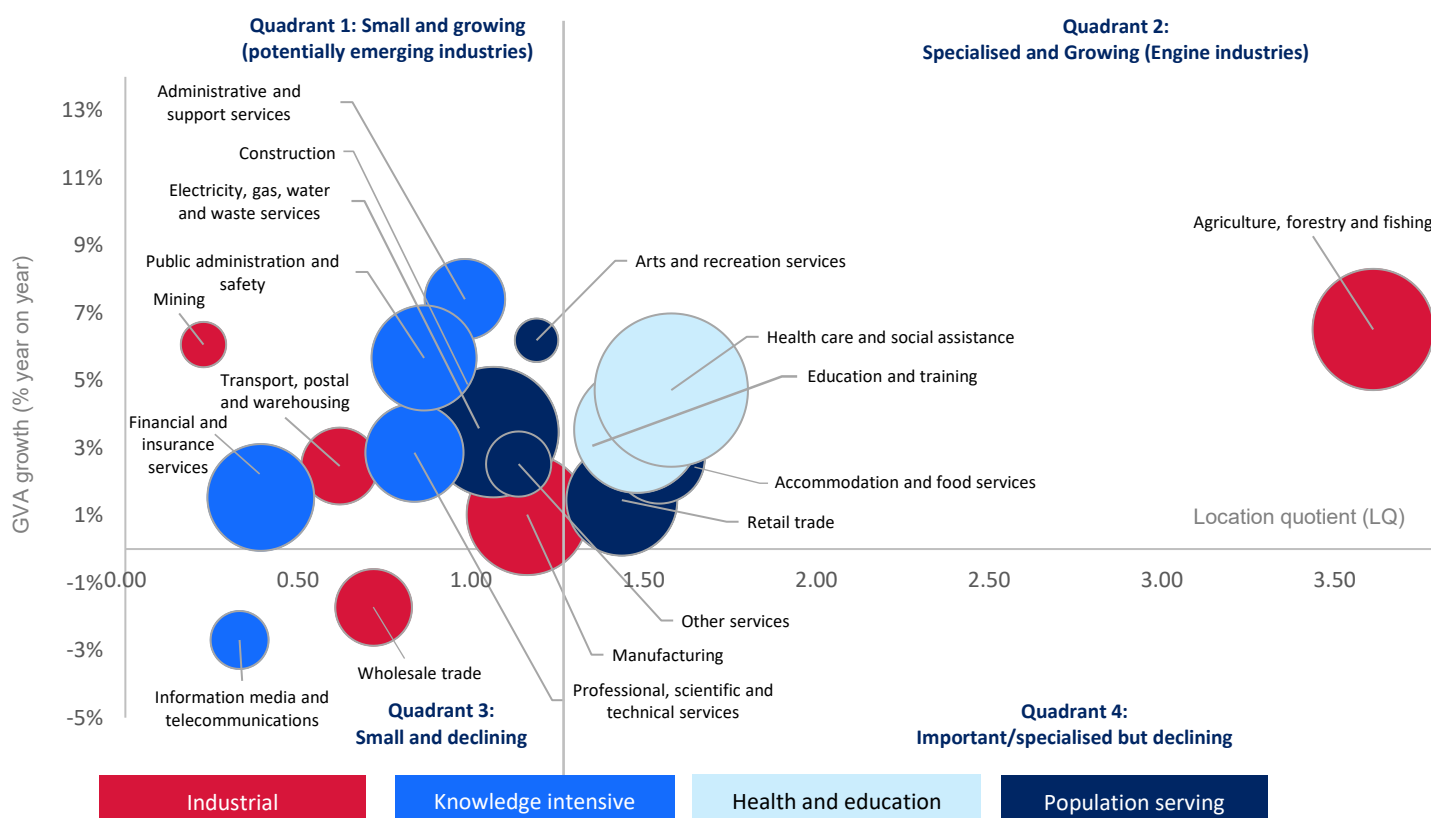


Figure 17: Location Quotient (LQ) Analysis by GVA, 2011-2020 (REMPLAN, 2020)

Note: While the 2018 REDS used employment data as the basis for LQ analysis, the 2023 Update has used GVA data. This allows for a clear demonstration of the changing economic impact of both engine and emerging industries across the region.

¹ LQ analysis is used to measure industry specialisation by comparing the relative size of an industry in the region versus the whole of NSW.

Emerging industries

The region's emerging specialisations have remained consistent since the 2018 REDS.

The **arts and recreation services** demonstrated strong growth at 6.2% per year from 2011-2020 due to growth in the film and television (TV) production sector and other creative industries. Major continuing investments being made in the region, including the development of Byron Studios, presenting key opportunities for sustained strong growth in the sector.

The **electricity, gas, water and waste services (including renewable energy)** sector has also demonstrated strong growth in recent years, having recorded 4.1% average annual growth between 2011 and 2020, outpacing the NSW average of 3.2%. With energy security being a critical focus for the region, investment in the development of renewable energy resources could bolster this sector as an emerging specialisation, with a number of significant renewable projects currently in development, in particular in the Richmond Valley.

Administrative and support services also demonstrated strong annual GVA growth over the past decade of 7.4% between 2011 and 2020. This is a trend that has been observed across many regions of NSW, but not to the same extent as in the Northern Rivers. Similarly, **public administration and safety** recorded sustained average annual growth of 5.7% between 2011 and 2020.

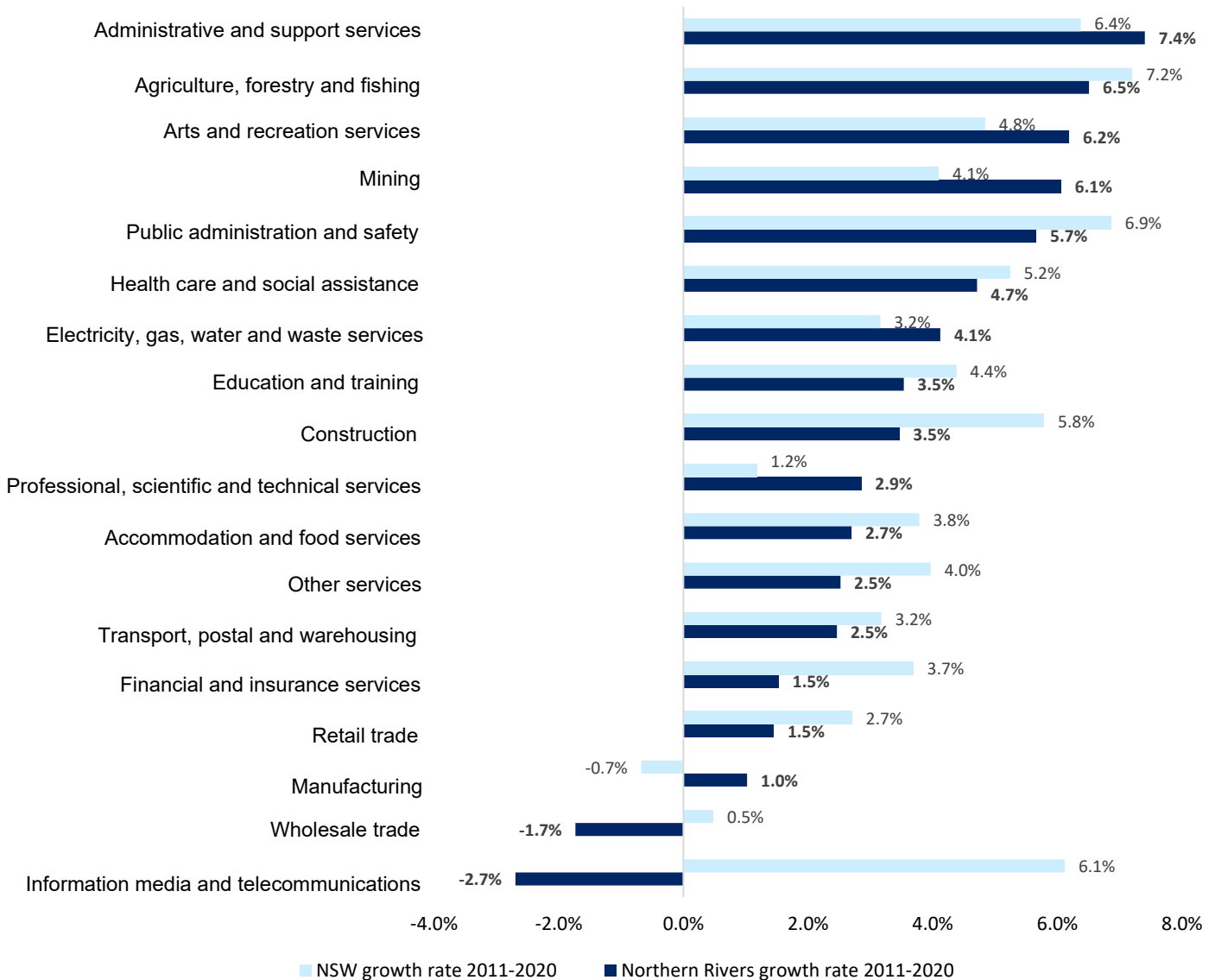


Figure 18: Change in GVA by Industry (% YoY), 2011-2020 (REMPPLAN, 2020).

Northern Rivers 2023 endowments

Review of the 2018 endowments

The 2018 REDS identified a diverse range of endowments underpinning Northern Rivers’ economy and regional competitiveness (see page 11). Despite recent shocks impacting many key endowments, consultation and analysis has confirmed they remain valid.

Key endowments include:

- Riverine, hinterland and coastal amenity
- Transport industry and infrastructure
- Lismore Base Hospital
- Local councils and state government
- Industry co-operatives and organisations
- Cultural & indigenous heritage.



Figure 19: View over the Byron Bay Lighthouse and coastline. Photo credit: Byron Shire Council.

New endowments

While not yet reflected in the employment and industry specialisation (LQ) analysis, recent policy efforts and the response to the 2022 flood have led to the creation of new endowments in the region. The enhanced collaborative approach taken by councils in the region was also highlighted by stakeholders as an addition to an existing endowment, reflecting the collective response to supporting recovery after the recent floods and a commitment to drive a shared agenda for future growth.

+ Richmond Valley Regional Jobs Precinct	The precinct unlocks new industrial lands to create more jobs for the region, particularly in agriculture, manufacturing, and renewable energy sectors.
+ Collaborative councils	Supports and enables the collaborative capacity of the region under local councils and government agencies, particularly in rebuilding after the floods.
+ Northern Rivers Reconstruction Corporation	The Northern Rivers Reconstruction Corporation will enhance the collaborative capacity of the region to support industry growth and rebuild after the floods, by working closely with local councils and key government agencies.

8. Looking ahead: Strategic opportunities for growth, resilience and liveability

Opportunities and vulnerabilities in engine and emerging industries

Healthcare and social services

The major investment into the Lismore Hospital redevelopment will support future growth in the healthcare and social services sector, but will need to be supported by a focus on skilled workforce development programs and actions to attract and retain key workers in the region.

GVA (2020, \$m)	981
Employment (2021)	12,521
Location Quotient (LQ) score (2020)	1.58
LQ residential care (2020)	1.7
LQ healthcare (2020)	1.4

Strengths

- Lismore Base Hospital is a significant asset as the major referral hospital in the region that incorporates Allied Health services. It has been significantly upgraded as part of its multi-stage, \$313 million redevelopment.
- The region also benefits from the University Centre for Rural Health, a collaboration between Sydney University, University of Wollongong, University of Western Sydney and the Northern NSW Local Health District. The region plays a role in providing placements for students across a range of health disciplines, and has led to significant investment to construct supporting infrastructure such as units for trainee doctors, specialists and nurses.^[31]
- St Vincent's Hospital is an important part of healthcare infrastructure serving both the region and beyond. Plans to upgrade the hospital will further strengthen the healthcare offering in the region.
- The region also has a range of significant aged care facilities, with major investments in recent years including the expansion of the Kyogle Village Aged Care Facility and the upgrade of the Crowley Residential Care Facility in Ballina.

Vulnerabilities

- Attracting skilled professionals to move to the region, from medical practitioners and nurses to carers and aides is a central challenge to meet the growing demand for healthcare and social assistance. The region also competes with other parts of regional NSW for access to skilled workers.
- The broader challenges associated with housing supply in the region also impacts on the availability of key worker accommodation, which is impeding the ability to attract and retain workers to the Northern Rivers region.

Opportunities

- A focus on achieving closer engagement of the health sector with local education institutions, including the local TAFE network and the university sector, can help develop the pipeline of skilled workers needed to meet growing demand across the health and care economy.

Manufacturing

The manufacturing sector in the Northern Rivers has continued to record growth in recent years, despite broader challenges for the sector across regional NSW. A focus on growing existing specialisations and leveraging opportunities to adopt high value advanced manufacturing can support ongoing.

GVA (2020, \$m)	614
Employment (2021)	3,879
LQ score (2020)	1.16
LQ meat & meat products (2020)	4.5
LQ dairy products (2020)	7.6

Strengths

- The region is a leader in food product manufacturing, with a strong focus on value-add processing associated with the Northern Rivers' key strengths in the agricultural sector.
- Key subsector strengths in food manufacturing in the Northern Rivers are meat product manufacturing (LQ of 4.5) and dairy products (LQ of 7.6), which reflect long established major manufacturing facilities in the region.
- The Sunshine Sugar Mill, Richmond Dairies, Norco Dairy Cooperative and the Casino Food Co-Op represent major established employers in the manufacturing sector located in the region, while Main Camp Natural Extracts is one of the largest tea tree processors and manufacturers in the world.

Vulnerabilities

- The sector is vulnerable to the impacts of extreme climatic conditions, both directly through damage to facilities and from supply stream interruptions, with high dependency of employment in the agricultural industry.
- During the 2022 floods, the Norco ice cream factory in Lismore incurred \$100 million in damage^[32], while the Sunshine Sugar Mill was closed for months to rectify major damage, which required production to be shifted elsewhere during the early part of the sugarcane harvesting season.^[33]
- A lack of local cold storage facilities for growers, manufacturers and producers is a significant growth inhibitor, while a lack of local food hubs or food grade manufacturing facilities on flood-free land limits the ability for companies to effectively scale up manufacturing operations.
- Land availability for industrial development is restricted due to environmental considerations, including biodiversity offsets.

Opportunities

- Opportunities exist for growth in high value and/or advanced manufacturing food processing facilities in industrial estates, especially those that are in flood-free areas, which can leverage the sector's strong links with agriculture in the region to create significant value-add opportunities.
- The Richmond Valley Regional Jobs Precinct will provide significant opportunities to attract new businesses to invest in the region. Identified investor target groups include downstream food processors of soybeans, specialist bio-degradable and/or compostable packaging manufacturers as well as research and innovation support services.
- Increased use of smart technology to enhance interconnectedness of producers and manufacturers, and across regions can support supply chain and logistics improvements.

Agriculture

The agriculture sector continues to be a key specialisation in the Northern Rivers and a major driver of economic growth, despite challenges associated with natural disasters and increased pressure from demand for land.

GVA (2020, \$m)	617
Employment (2021)	3,971
LQ score (2020)	3.61
LQ other agriculture (2020) ^a	7.9
LQ sheep, grains, beef & dairy cattle (2020)	2.1

^a Other agriculture includes fruit and tree nut growing, nursery and floriculture production, vegetable, and other crop growing.

Strengths

- The region is a leading producer of cattle, macadamias, poultry, and dairy, which reflects the diverse nature of agriculture in the region.
- The sector is supported by a strong food manufacturing specialisation in the region (see page 30).
- Kyogle and Casino are primary regions for agricultural production, with activity mostly focused on cattle, milk and poultry and sugarcane growing around Evans Head.
- Ballina and Lismore specialise in macadamia and sugarcane production, while Byron Shire has a range of diverse agriculture producers including small-scale regenerative, organic, and boutique value-add farms.

Vulnerabilities

- Flooding and a series of adverse climate events since 2018 have impacted agricultural production throughout the region resulting in property damage and lost crops and livestock.
- The 2022 floods are estimated to have severely impacted up to 20% of agricultural land across the region, with substantial damage to the sugarcane industry and soy bean crops.^{[20] [33] [34]}
- The sector continues to face key challenges with securing a sufficient workforce to meet demand, especially during peak harvest periods.
- There are significant development pressures across the region given high demand for land for a range of residential, commercial and industrial purposes. These pressures are likely to increase given the heightened focus on finding land suitable for development that is flood resilient.

Opportunities

- With the reopening of international borders, a focus on attraction of skilled migrants can help fill skills gaps in the agricultural workforce and support ongoing prosperity in the sector. This will need to be supported by a focus on ensuring sufficient local housing and accommodation is available for these workers and their families.
- Increased uptake of new technology including agtech can help support increased productivity and output in the sector, but will need to be supported by ongoing investment to enhance digital connectivity across the region.
- Increased agritourism presents opportunities to support primary producers to diversify their income. However, this will require careful management of potential issues associated with land use conflict and environmental impacts.

Tourism

Despite the substantial impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the sector, tourism remains a key cornerstone of the Northern Rivers' economy, with high levels of employment across the region.

Visitor spend (2021, \$m) ^[12]	1,275
Employment (2021) ^a	14,416
LQ score (2020) ^b	1.37
LQ food and beverage (2020)	1.3
LQ accommodation (2020)	2.3

a Summation of ANZSIC 1 digit Retail trade, Accommodation and food services and Arts and recreation.

b LQ for Accommodation and food services.

Strengths

- Tourism is a significant contributor to the region, in particular in the coastal regions, such as Byron Shire, where a range of coastal amenities, hinterlands, rainforests and local cultural offerings are major visitor attractions.
- The region's clean, green, and organic branding is a strength with many sustainable, nature-based tourism offerings central to the region's visitor economy profile.
- The region has an events culture, with established festivals and events including the Byron Bay Bluesfest, Byron Bay Writers Festival, Casino Beef Week, Lismore Lantern Parade, Maclean Highland Gathering, Tyalgum Music Festival and the Summerland Giant Pumpkin and Watermelon Festival.
- The North Byron Parklands is an endowment that is home to major music festivals including Splendour in the Grass and the Falls Music and Arts Festival.

Vulnerabilities

- The industry is vulnerable to externalities. Since 2018, flooding and bushfires have damaged natural amenity and infrastructure, while COVID-19 restrictions reduced visitation and spend in the region, with total visitor expenditure in 2021 down \$423 million on 2019 levels. ^[12]
- The tourism and hospitality sector has also experienced ongoing staff shortages, as many workers have shifted to other sectors following COVID-19 and natural disaster related job losses. There is heavy competition between sectors, and tourism businesses are struggling to fill vacancies. ^[35]

Opportunities

- Improvements to visitor accessibility to the region through continued investment in key transport infrastructure, such as airport and local road upgrades, can support ongoing growth in the sector.
- A continued focus on conservation of the region's nature and heritage assets can help expand natural, cultural and active tourism offerings, supported by new investments, such as the development of the Northern Rivers Rail Trail.
- The region has an opportunity to support growth in film tourism, leveraging the growing sector. The revised NSW Fun State Environment Planning Policy ^[36] has increased the number of days of filming allowed as exempt development, and a permanent home for Byron Studios will support future growth.
- Opportunity exists to further enhance collective branding around sustainable products and activities.
- Fostering further collaboration between training institutions and the tourism industry can help bridge the gap between training and work placement, and help to ensure the retention of skilled workers.

Key themes in stakeholder consultation

The Northern Rivers has been severely impacted by repeated flooding events. During consultation, stakeholders focused on the challenge of reimagining the future of towns and villages across the region as part of the substantial recovery and rebuilding effort. A key focus was on creating inclusive growth that encompasses sustainable job opportunities and an increased supply of affordable housing.

Stakeholders highlighted the formation of the Northern Rivers Reconstruction Corporation as a key mechanism to help support recovery, change and growth, given its significant powers to assist with planning and rezoning changes, which can support accelerated development of new housing, commercial and industrial areas on flood resilient land.

Resilience in rebuilding

Recent flood events and other natural disasters, alongside the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, have brought the need to build principles of resilience into policy and programs. Stakeholders highlighted that reconstruction focused on increased use of flood resilient land represents a key focus and opportunity.

Stakeholders also highlighted the importance of ongoing collaboration across all levels of government to seek optimal solutions that can deliver long term, lasting benefits. Reconstruction and the opening up of industrial commercial, and residential areas on flood resilient and flood free lands can provide a once in a generation opportunity to build a more resilient and prosperous region.

Housing availability and affordability

As reflected in analysis of the housing market (see Page 23), the region continues to face significant challenges associated with housing availability and affordability. Stakeholders highlighted that current housing shortages and affordability challenges are expected to be long lasting.

Stakeholders highlighted that actions to increase total housing supply will be impacted by the need to support replacement of flood destroyed housing stock, the influx of workers associated with reconstruction, limited availability of land outside of flood zones and ongoing population growth.

Workforce constraints

Stakeholders highlighted that ongoing skills and workforce shortages in key sectors such as agriculture, healthcare, tourism and hospitality are presenting challenges to sustainable economic growth. It was also highlighted the presence of more remote workers has increased demand for local services.

Stakeholders outlined the return of migration will be important to addressing key workforce shortages, in particular for tourism and agriculture. Alongside workers moving to the region to support recovery efforts, there will be additional pressure on the local housing market as migration returns.

Northern Rivers REDS - 2023 Update strategies

In response to recent floods and other events, stakeholders highlighted the need to develop a revised set of strategies emphasising the most pressing issues associated with economic recovery. The 2023 REDS Update strategies for the Northern Rivers include:

New	Utilise the Northern Rivers Reconstruction Corporation mandate and local government collaboration to develop a more climate resilient economy and provide for future population and economic growth across the region.
New	Provide better access to jobs and affordable housing for local residents through strategic employment and housing land development.
New	Develop and support the growth of emerging industries and the visitor economy.

Key enablers of economic growth

A number of enablers have been identified to assist with delivering each of the strategies. This list is non-exhaustive, with a focus on identifying priority short- to medium-term enablers. Responsibility for implementation of these enablers sits with various levels of government, and in some cases may also include business, industry or non-government bodies. Collaboration across these entities at a local level will be key to achieving results.

Strategy	New enablers		Lead and support	Rationale
Utilise the Northern Rivers Reconstruction Corporation mandate and local government collaboration to develop a more climate resilient economy and provide for future population and economic growth across the region.	Land use	Prioritise coordinated land use planning and overcoming planning complexities to accelerate the release and development of land for residential, commercial, and industrial uses and support the delivery of enabling infrastructure.	Northern Rivers Reconstruction Corporation (NRRC) , local councils, Department of Regional NSW (DRNSW), Department of Planning and Environment (DPE) Planning.	Support residential, commercial and industry development on flood resilient and flood free land.
	Infrastructure	Investigate short- and medium-term energy and water infrastructure requirements to support growth in agriculture and manufacturing.	Local councils , DRNSW.	Enable sustained growth and increased productivity with better water security and greater digital connectivity.
	Infrastructure	Support councils to use the Connectivity Index Tool following its 2023 release to develop a region-wide digital black spots map, identify major gaps for key industries and businesses in the region, and plan for digital infrastructure delivery.	NSW Telco Authority , local councils, DRNSW.	Enable sustained growth and increased productivity with better water security and greater digital connectivity.
	Government regulation and information	Adopt a regional approach to economic recovery and reconstruction to build local business and workforce capability and maximise opportunities for local employees, businesses and Aboriginal communities.	NRRC , local councils, DRNSW.	Leverage region wide opportunities to support sustainable economic growth and recovery.

Strategy	New enablers		Lead and support	Rationale
<p>Provide better access to jobs and affordable housing for local residents through strategic employment and housing land development.</p>	<p>People and skills</p>	<p>Conduct a skills demand and local supply analysis to support the Richmond Valley Regional Job Precinct.</p>	<p>DRNSW, Training Services NSW, local councils, TAFE NSW.</p>	<p>Create a focus on attractive employment opportunities and ensuring a strong pipeline of industry-ready skills to fill demand.</p>
	<p>Infrastructure</p>	<p>Review planning controls to ensure adequate provisions and incentives for housing diversity, including affordable, social housing as well as temporary housing for displaced residents and the (re)construction workforce.</p>	<p>NRRC, DPE Planning, DRNSW, local councils.</p>	<p>Increase the supply and diversity of the housing mix, particularly for those displaced by floods.</p>
		<p>Strategically plan for a pipeline of flood-free/ flood resilient employment lands to support local job growth and business expansion.</p>		<p>Improve business confidence with making flood-free lands available.</p>
<p>Develop and support the growth of emerging industries and the visitor economy.</p>	<p>People and skills</p>	<p>Improve workforce attraction and retention through a focus on liveability, and work with NSW government agencies to determine the training programs needed to develop in demand skills in the region.</p>	<p>Local councils, Training Services NSW, DRNSW, TAFE NSW, local universities, NRRC.</p>	<p>Ensure sufficient and appropriate skills are available to support local industry growth.</p>
	<p>Infrastructure</p>	<p>Monitor opportunities for innovation within emerging industries, including the renewable energy sector, and explore incentives to encourage investment attraction in the sector.</p>	<p>DRNSW, local councils.</p>	<p>Diversifying sources of energy supply in the region improves energy security for businesses.</p>

Strategy	New enablers		Lead and support	Rationale
		Enhance nature-based tourism through further activation of natural, cultural and heritage assets, and enhance collaboration between private land owners and government where natural assets are currently not accessible to the public.	Destination North Coast , National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS), local councils, Transport for NSW (TfNSW), Destination NSW, NRRC.	Promote a vibrant visitor economy and increase overall accessibility to the region for visitors with additional benefits to the local community.
		Invest in transport infrastructure to improve connectivity and enhance tourism access, including the adoption of digital technologies to grow visitor experiences.	Local councils , TfNSW, Destination North Coast, NPWS, Destination NSW.	



Figure 20: A man leans against his Kombi van, considering a surf. Photo credit: Ballina Shire Council.

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Figure 21: Cows grazing in the Byron Hinterland. Photo credit: Byron Shire Council.