Rural Affairs

HIGHLIGHTS

 Labour will:

- Restore a voice for Rural Affairs at the Cabinet table by re-establishing the Rural Affairs ministerial portfolio
- Reinstate a Rural Proofing policy to proactively assess government initiatives on rural communities
- Engage with rural health professionals to ensure adequate access to emergency and acute treatment for all rural New Zealanders
- Engage with rural support trusts to review the increasing level of dependence on these voluntary organisations for the provision of vital social support services in rural areas.

Introduction

Labour has a proud record of delivering to our rural communities. We have always promoted and acknowledged the importance of strong rural communities in a country so dependent on primary production for its export earnings. Labour will continue to work with all primary and rural industry sectors to provide support and infrastructure where needed. Healthy, vibrant rural communities are at the heart of rural productivity. The investment in core government services and infrastructure through roading, telecommunications, health and education provides growth and opportunities for many rural towns along with a renewal of purpose.

While last in government, Labour established a Rural Affairs portfolio that undertook oversight responsibility across government agencies for the development and implementation of policies for the benefit of rural communities. The development of the Rural Proofing framework placed an obligation on government agencies to proactively consider implications for rural people of any new government initiative. The incoming National government removed this mandate over the last eight years.

Appointment of a Minister for Rural Affairs inside Cabinet

In our last term in Government, we appointed a Minister for Rural Affairs to cover a wide range of rural and provincial issues and we will do so again. Issues such as the establishment of Heartland Services and the delivery of high speed broadband to rural areas are initiatives that require a broad rural focus and advocacy at ministerial level.

Labour will:

- Re-establish a Minister for Rural Affairs to Cabinet to cover a wide range of rural and provincial issues.
Rural broadband

To succeed as a nation, New Zealand needs high speed broadband across both urban and rural areas so all Kiwis have the same opportunities. Labour is committed to and recognises the urgent need to ensure our rural communities are strengthened and have resilient telecommunications capabilities when disaster strikes.

The roll out of Ultra-Fast Broadband and the Rural Broadband Initiative has been beset with delays, cost over-runs and low take up. While connectivity for rural areas under the RBI footprint is expected to improve eventually, many communities will remain under-served. For those that can get it, broadband remains expensive and slow for many rural consumers.

Labour is concerned the roll out has lacked transparency and good governance. It has also excluded many rural New Zealanders particularly those living in remote areas where geographical isolation presents challenges for connectivity.

Alongside our Information and Communications Technology policy, Labour will:

- Undertake a thorough review of the government roll out to ensure that it is delivering value for money while providing the transformational promise of high speed internet access for all New Zealanders
- Use this review to better support rural and semi-rural communities improve their connectedness and put them on a footing equivalent to their urban counterparts
- Develop stronger regulation, such as through setting up a specific government entity, to fill gaps left by the private market. This is so rural areas have comprehensive connectivity through broadband, phone towers, and roads, and continued telecommunications capability when disasters strike.

Rural roading networks

Labour understands the importance of quality roading in provincial areas and believes that local roads are being short changed by the current Government’s “Roads of National Significance’ focus. Good provincial networks are essential for regional development. Much of the nation’s exports originate in the regions and require infrastructure that allows for safe and efficient movement.

Labour will ensure that funding for local roads is not further undermined by the excessive focus on Roads of National Significance (RoNS). The current government has slashed funding for new local roads and local road maintenance in real terms so that it could pour more money into its low-value RoNS projects. This has left cash-strapped councils to pick up the tab, which has pushed up local government debt, and seen local roads degraded when maintenance has been deferred.
Belatedly, the current government has promised to partially reverse these cuts to fund a handful of projects, selected by the government. It’s too little, too late. And, once again, it is the current government dictating to local communities rather than giving them choice. The Government’s review of Funding Assistance Rates is also causing the regions serious concerns.

Alongside our Transport policy, **Labour will:**

- Ensure that rural areas are not disadvantaged in terms of quality roading which is essential to support regional development goals
- Continue the planned investment in new state highways in regional areas. However, large planned projects with a high cost will be reviewed to see if better value for money solutions can be found
- Give local communities more of a say on how the money is spent in their areas
- Make more funding available for transport projects of regional importance by doubling the funding range of $70-$140m to $140-$280m
- Review the Funding Assistance Ratio to make it fairer and more efficient, providing relief for local government and reflecting the national benefit of local roads
- Invest in forestry roads to extend the network and make them safer.

**Rural jobs**

Labour will make the investments needed to lift our regions to their full potential by upgrading our regional economies, creating jobs for our people, and improving the lives of families. We will do this by working in partnership with local government and communities.

Along our Regional Development policy, **Labour will:**

- Work in partnership with each region to develop a Regional Growth Plan establish a Regional Development Fund to help pay for capital investments that will upgrade regional economies. The Fund will initially be allocated $200 million over its first four years
- Support manufacturing in the regions through an R&D tax credit
- Ensure that government bodies buy from Kiwi manufacturers whenever possible
- Look for opportunities to locate government operations in the regions where practical and cost-effective.

**Adverse events**

Support to enable farmers to clean up flood affected properties and drought stricken farms to purchase feed for animals is both humane and a smart investment in the productive sectors. Labour in government reintroduced support from central government for farmers and communities severely affected by droughts and floods. New policy was then developed to establish clear guidelines to assess and act in times of adverse events.
Labour will:

- Continue to support farmers affected by Adverse Climatic Events using the policy criteria established when last in Government and review the increasing dependence on Rural Trusts given they do most of the work and are volunteers.

Rural health

When in Government, Labour introduced policies to alleviate some of the pressures on rural health practitioners and to attract and retain competent health professionals to remain in rural areas. A new wave of committed professionals were able to support rural communities through the introduction of Rural Nurse Practitioner scholarships and training, along with both pre-and post-graduate training for GPs.

The funding and delivery of aged care in New Zealand is coming under increasing strain, including in rural communities. Labour will look to developing a model that supports health and care needs of the elderly, particularly in rural and provincial centres and we will work with regional and local authorities to ensure public transport requirements, housing and access to health services occur.

Alongside our Health policy, Labour will:

- Review the current funding formula for Primary healthcare to make it fairer, more equitable, and less complex. Affordable access for children, vulnerable populations, and rural communities will be a priority
- Investigate the establishment of after-hours walk-in clinics in hospital emergency departments where after hour GP services are not available or are unaffordable
- Support and train more Nurse Practitioners, community outreach nurses, and dental therapists to deliver Primary Health Care services.
- Develop models to attract and retain enthusiastic and competent health professionals to rural areas, these could include boosting rural nurses, scholarships and training

Rural education

Labour is committed to adequately resourcing education opportunities for rural communities, including transport options and supporting providers to operate in rural areas. Labour will: partner with schools, local government and communities to put in place infrastructure that will allow students, particularly those from low-decile schools, who do not currently have internet connections to use their portable devices to access the internet at home.

Institutes of technology and polytechnics play a key role in ensuring that labour market needs are met at a regional and national level. Not enough attention is currently being paid to supporting the development of skill and trade training. Young people, particularly in rural areas, need to be actively encouraged into trades training.

Labour believes that Adult and Community Education (ACE) provide important opportunities for learning and training. Rural communities were some of the major losers from the National Government’s cuts to ACE. It was through ACE that many rural New Zealanders were able to access tertiary education opportunities closer to home.
One of our core principles for this will be that there must be a range of quality, relevant programmes available in all regions of New Zealand. Rural Education Activities Programmes (REAPs) will have an important role in this.

Alongside our Tertiary Education and Education policies, Labour will:

• Support the development of regional tertiary education strategies that will include a particular focus on meeting regional labour market needs, research and development and social and community needs
• Ensure that there is a network of regional institutions dedicated to meeting the labour market and skill needs of our regions. In some cases this may require additional support to enable institutions to operate where there are not the student numbers to support them.
• Increase funding for Adult and Community Education (ACE) to improve access to tertiary education opportunities for rural communities
• Consult with all parts of the sector - schools, community providers (such as Workers’ Educational Associations, REAPs, English Language Partners, and Literacy Aotearoa), and tertiary education providers and interested stakeholders (such as local government) about how this restored funding should be allocated and how to best connect adult and community education with other aligned sectors.