



16 January 2026

Joint Standing Committee on Trade and Investment Growth
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

via email: jsctig@aph.gov.au

Dear Committee,

Creating sustainable economic growth in rural and regional Australia

The Australian Small Business and Family Enterprise Ombudsman (ASBFEO) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Trade and Investment Growth inquiry, *Creating Sustainable Economic Growth in Rural and Regional Australia*.

ASBFEO supports initiatives that create sustainable economic growth in rural and regional Australia. As of 30 June 2025, 30% of small businesses were based in rural and regional Australia, consistent with the Australian population distribution. These rural and regional small businesses provide important products, services and economic contribution to their local community.¹

ASBFEO's submission makes several recommendations to improve Australian small and family business' access to export markets and the economic benefits of international trade. Based on stakeholder feedback and data made available to ASBFEO, rural and regional small businesses experience a range of challenges and barriers in rural and regional Australia. These concerns are centred around access to streamlined sources of information, transport and infrastructure, telecommunications and internet access, economic scale and industry collaboration, government support and grant access.

Recommendation 1: Streamline and raise small business awareness of government resources and information on export processes and requirements, including through active promotion and accessible contact points

There is currently publicly available information to assist small business owners that are exploring opportunities to export their products or services, however, this information is not well organised nor its existence widely known.

Small business owners often do not know where to begin when starting the exploratory process and can be overloaded with information, such as the export-related regulations that businesses need to comply with across various levels of government. Efforts have been made to streamline the information on some key websites, such as business.gov.au and Go Global Toolkit, however businesses first need to be aware of these resources to utilise them.

We recommend that further efforts be made to streamline this information and raise small business awareness of sites such as business.gov.au, including key points of contact, to assist

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Counts of Australian Businesses including Entries and Exits*, July 2021 – June 2025, Datacube 8, Accessed 7 January 2025.



them with getting a clear understanding of the process and key requirements when exploring the possibility of exporting their product or service, or seeking opportunities to expand the global reach of their business.

Recommendation 2: Improve transport infrastructure to facilitate exports from rural and regional Australia

While the vast majority of Australian exporters are small and medium enterprises—for example, 93% in 2020-21²—it is these businesses that typically experience greater export challenges than larger businesses, especially those located in rural and remote areas.

For example, we heard from the Northern Territory Government and Agribusiness Regional Development Association that small businesses can experience export challenges that larger businesses with more resources and deeper networks do not. Given the remoteness of rural and regional areas in the NT, there is often a lack of transport infrastructure to support the efficient export and import of goods requiring that they be shipped to another location before export, increasing transport costs and the time incurred by the impacted business.

We encourage the Committee to consult with small businesses in rural and regional Australia to identify where new or upgraded transport infrastructure is needed to facilitate small business exports. One example of an infrastructure upgrade that is providing significant benefit to small businesses exporters are the upgrades to increase container, dry bulk and rail throughput capacity to the Darwin Port.

Recommendation 3: Foster collaboration and networking to help small businesses identify opportunities to work together to overcome export challenges, share resources and build external economies of scale

We have heard that where small businesses sell a similar product or service, and have the ability to market their product under one banner, that this can increase the likelihood of creating a successful, resilient business operation in export markets. This is typically facilitated through small business collaboration and networking.

There are examples of Australian small businesses working together to tackle shared problems, such as pooling funds for marketing, using a shared manufacturing or processing facility, or building demand for transport services. These alliances can be informal or via more formal arrangements such as a cooperative. There are several cooperatives experiencing long-running success in exporting, demonstrating the benefits that small business exporters with shared interests can have when they collaborate and work together. For example, the Mid-West Food Industries Alliance in Western Australia helps their members to market and promote their products under a recognised regional brand, fostering sustainable business growth.

We heard from stakeholders that small business exporters could benefit from being connected with, and potentially working in collaboration with, other businesses who are encountering similar export challenges. Providing small businesses with opportunities to share their experiences, with

² Australian Trade and Investment Commission (Austrade), *Australian State of Exporters Report 2022*, Austrade, Australian Government, 2023, accessed 9 January 2026.



greater involvement from local councils or industry bodies who are well placed to facilitate shared problem solving, could help small businesses identify opportunities to work together to overcome export challenges, share resources and build external economies of scale.

Recommendation 4: Improve telecommunications and internet services in rural and regional Australia

A number of stakeholders highlighted the continued existence of telecommunications blackspots and lack of internet access in rural and regional areas, for example in Western Australia and Queensland, that is a barrier to small businesses trying to access export markets. In this digital age, it is essential that small businesses have access to affordable telecommunications and internet services for processing sales, administration, accounting, research and to access business support services.

We recommend that governments, telecommunications and internet providers continue to expand coverage in rural and regional areas so that small businesses are able to operate and grow their business, including through pursuing export opportunities.

Recommendation 5: Facilitate improved access and targeting of government support programs and grant opportunities for rural and regional small businesses

With the increasing frequency and severity of natural disasters it is essential that government support programs and grant opportunities are accessible to small and micro-businesses in need. However, there are some grant programs where the eligibility criteria fails to account for the unique conditions faced by rural and regional businesses, and many small business owners find the process of preparing a grant application challenging.

We have heard that small businesses are unlikely to seek assistance from government if those assistance channels are inaccessible or overly complex. We note that almost half (48%) of First Nations small business owners operate outside of Australia's greater capital city regions,³ and many small business owners report persistent barriers such as limited access to timely information, insufficient on-the-ground support, and a lack of regular mentoring. Available resources and support is often underutilised due to the time constraints faced by many small business owners, for example, where they are unable to take time away from work to attend a workshop or conference.

Improving small business access to government support and grant programs could help provide them with the resources to rebuild their business in times of need, better equipping them to survive and thrive and pursue export opportunities.

³ Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census of Population and Housing, 2021, Tablebuilder, Extracted 9 January 2026.



Australian Government



Australian
Small Business and
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Ombudsman

If you require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact the ASBFEO Advocacy team via email at advocacy@asbfeo.gov.au.

Yours sincerely

The Hon. Bruce Billson

Australian Small Business and Family Enterprise Ombudsman