

PRODUCTION VALUES

Ag's hottest spots revealed

JAMES WAGSTAFF

MILDURA has emerged as the official capital of Australian agriculture.

Figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics show that total agriculture production in the boundaries of the Mildura Rural City Council was worth a whopping \$1.13 billion in 2020-21 – the most of any local government area in Australia.

Mildura is considered a major yet diverse food bowl in Victoria with horticulture and cropping the most prominent industries.

According to ABS data, Mildura's most significant agriculture sector during 2020-21 was fruit and nuts (excluding grapes), which were valued at \$422.5 million, with the bulk of those proceeds coming from almonds (\$273 million).

A further \$324 million was derived from grapes while broadacre crop receipts totalled \$250 million. The most valued broadacre crops in the shire during 2020-21 were wheat (\$117.2 million), barley (\$86 million) and lentils (\$10.9 million).



Of the top 25 shires according to the ABS data, 12 were in Victoria, seven in Queensland, four in NSW and one each in South Australia and Western

Australia. Victorian Farmers Federation president Emma Germano said the figures "really demonstrate that Victoria is an agriculture powerhouse".



Farmer Ian Arney, on his farm at Werrimull in the Millewa district of northwest Victoria, says new challenges may threaten Mildura's glowing record of agricultural production. Picture: James Wagstaff

Mildura Rural City councillor and Millewa District farmer Ian Arney said while local farmers were benefiting from a good season, particularly for broadacre crops, there were numerous challenges facing the local agriculture industry.

He said reduced markets for tablegrapes and winegrapes – coupled with rising input costs and labour issues – meant local growers were feeling the pinch.

"The next 12 months are not looking too rosy ... there are going to be issues with finding a home for them," Cr Arney said. "There's been a lot of expenditure – certainly in the past few years because markets have been pretty good – but all

of a sudden that has been turned on its ear."

Cr Arney said outbreaks of varroa mite in parts of NSW meant trying to source enough beehives to pollinate large-scale almond plantings in the district was also a concern.

On the broadacre crop front, Cr Arney said the season was "fantastic" coming out of winter into the crucial spring.

"There's some just brilliant crops at the moment, but the frosts have dragged a fair bit of moisture out of the crops and out of the ground, so they are looking forward to a good drink," he said.

"There have been a number of people who have been top-

dressing and pushing their crops and, honestly, they are shit-hot."

Mildura MP Ali Cupper said Mildura's standing as Australia's richest farming region was out of step with government investment in the area.

"That really should give governments pause for consideration of whether we are actually getting our fair share of state infrastructure," Ms Cupper said. "We need a new deal for freight – if the Murray Basin Rail project has been complete then we need a new deal. We need a new plan that doesn't abandon the dream of full standardisation."

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There are "disturbing statistics" on how little produce from north-west Victoria goes to port by rail.

Picture: Ben Gross

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A billion reasons for an upgrade

By Allan Murphy
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A REPORT highlighting the importance of north-west Victoria as Australia's key agricultural producer is further evidence of why the Murray Basin Rail Project should be completed in its full scope, according to the project manager of a proposed \$40 million rail freight hub near Ouyen.

Michael O'Callaghan said the Australian Bureau of Statistics report that put the annual value of the region's production at more than \$1 billion also accentuated "disturbing statistics" on how much of that produce was being transported to port by road when it should be on rail.

The proposed Sunraysia Mallee Port Link would connect north-west Victoria to the Port of Melbourne, has already received financial backing from Mildura Council and Mildura Regional Devel-

opment, and would transfer more than half the 800,000 tonnes of produce and 19 million truck kilometres each year from road to rail.

Mr O'Callaghan said that considering the key advancements of the Calder Highway over its history, involving at least 10 towns being bypassed, it was "beyond belief" that the complete opposite had happened to the Mildura rail corridor under a revised MBRP.

"By not standardising the whole Murray Basin rail network, there will be a need for 99 million truck kilometres over the next four years alone to freight grain, almonds, hay, fruit, wine, nuts, vegetables and mineral sands on road instead of rail," Mr O'Callaghan said.

"And this affects all Victorians, from the top of the state to the south, including the inner and western suburbs of Melbourne.

"Nothing but the standardisation of the whole network will achieve the

long-lasting and urgent environmental, social and economic benefits of having freight on rail."

Mr O'Callaghan said freight trains on the Mildura rail corridor no longer went direct to port, through Ballarat, as they did before the project started and faced 260 added kilometres to the round trip, while the Sea Lake and Manangatang rail corridors were no longer going to be converted to standard gauge, instead remaining on broad gauge as part of the revised MBRP.

"The local government area of Mildura Rural City Council is the highest agricultural producer of Australia, yet, being the furthest municipality from Victoria's ports, the area also has some other high, but disturbing statistics on how much of their produce goes to port on road when it should be on rail.

"And the reason why lands squarely on the half-completed, and soon-to-be-abandoned Murray Basin Rail Project."