

**PROCEEDINGS OF THE AUSTRALIAN RANGELAND SOCIETY  
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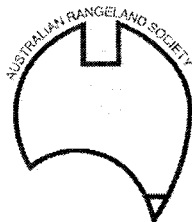
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*The Australian Rangeland Society*

**ALLIANCES IN THE RANGELANDS – LEB & OTHER EXAMPLES:  
DESERT KNOWLEDGE AUSTRALIA LINKED BUSINESS NETWORKS PROJECT**

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**THE IMPETUS: CONSTRAINTS TO GROWTH OF DESERT ENTERPRISES**

Almost all businesses in desert regions of Australia's rangelands have less than 20 employees. A significant block to sustaining business activity in remote areas is isolation; from other businesses, from each other, from customers, as well as the lack of connections with publicly funded infrastructure such as research and development and technical training. A direct response to this isolation is the tendency of businesses to be self contained, and to offer a broad range of products or services only to their local market. Thus desert businesses don't gain the benefits of specialization enjoyed by their coastal counterparts, such as productivity improvements and the ability to profitably service distant markets.

**THE PROJECT: CROSS BORDER BUSINESSES CLUSTERING WITHIN AND BETWEEN INDUSTRIES**

The pilot Desert Knowledge Australia Linked Business Networks Project aimed to respond to these constraints by establishing mentoring networks for small businesses, facilitating the development of their skills and exploring ways to develop critical mass, within regions and across borders, focusing on relationship building and using a range of communication technologies to connect businesses across the desert regions of Australia's rangelands.

The 21 month pilot was a collaboration between Desert Knowledge Australia, Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre and a range of regional development, business and related organisations from across four states and the NT, and was supported by AusIndustry and Telstra.

**SOME OF THE CHALLENGES**

- No previous examples of business clustering across such distances – we have been learning as we go, informed by national and international examples of local clustering.
- Time needed for relationship and trust-building between businesses and the development of real projects within the funded period of the pilot. Business people needed to know what was in it for them, why they should invest their time in the network.
- A flexible approach to reflect industry and regional differences (four industry networks were established within the project, together with a number of special interest networks), and to develop at the pace and in the direction the participating businesses chose.
- Working with the reality of regular staff turnover, in particular local facilitators.
- Working with varying levels of partner agencies' engagement.

**HELPING INCREASE THE VOICE AND VISIBILITY OF BUSINESSES IN THE DESERT**

- Businesses joining together to form a joint venture to tender for larger projects than individually they had the capacity for, eg 5 businesses in the Broken Hill Mining Services hub formed a joint tendering venture, which has secured \$5 million worth of business to date.

Collaborative marketing initiatives – promoting a network of businesses to increase the visibility of individual businesses; business expos, trade fairs, festivals, web, brochures, eg 11 businesses in the Bush Products and Local Foods Network presented a range of products at a trade fair linking producers and customers across the desert via videoconferencing.

Shared research and development and professional development to save time and money among the businesses in a network, eg a building designer in the Sustainable Building Network gaining professional input from network members on his energy efficient house design. It was a WA finalist in the 2005 Design Awards.

Generating business through contacts made within and through the network.

Linking businesses directly with researchers and policy makers through network events and projects, eg linking tourism businesses in the desert and researchers into issues related to 4WD tourism.