



Rural health group calls for urgent meeting with government

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The national rural health group is calling for urgent meetings with the incoming health and primary industries ministers to help solve the serious rural health crisis.

Michelle Thompson, chief executive of the Rural Health Alliance of Aotearoa New Zealand (RHAANZ), says they need to work with the two new cabinet ministers to identify rural health issues and come up with solutions.

She says RHAANZ has top priorities and solutions already articulated in its rural health road map, which is its 10 to 15-year plan for growing healthy rural communities in New Zealand.

“We look forward to working with the new government, in particular the new health minister and new primary industries minister,” Thompson says.

“We are especially keen to pick up discussions on Labour’s election promise to address core inequities of access to health services for rural people and NZ First’s election pledges to develop a national rural and provincial health services plan and to increase health research and development funding to two percent of GDP over 10 years.

“All three coalition parties have expressed a strong commitment to improving mental health and wellbeing services, reviewing primary care funding and the national travel assistance scheme, addressing rural health workforce issues as well as an increased focus on resilience and prevention.

“This aligns well with the framework for rural mental health developed by RHAANZ and some of the early work we have done towards suicide prevention and we look forward to synergies with these policy commitments.

“This new government has the opportunity to appoint a rural health commissioner. Australia appointed their first ever [rural health commissioner](#), Professor Paul Worley, at the weekend. This is a milestone event, an election promise on which they delivered. The commissioner will provide independent advice to government on rural health for the betterment of Australia.

“We are eager to set up an urgent meeting with government about introducing a similar role in New Zealand to help them deliver on their promise of improving access to health services for rural New Zealanders.

“The government needs to help remove barriers so rural people’s health is considered just as important as those who live in cities,” she says.

There are more than 600,000 people living in rural New Zealand, equivalent of easily being the country’s second largest city. Agriculture and tourism are the powerhouses of the Kiwi economy.

Every year, more than two and a half million tourists visit rural New Zealand. In 2011-2012, \$53 billion, or 25 percent of GDP, was generated directly or indirectly by the agri-food sector, from rural New Zealand.

For more information contact Make Lemonade editor-in-chief Kip Brook on 0275 030188.

Photo: RHAANZ chief executive Michelle Thompson