



Australian  
Chamber of Commerce  
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# TRANSCRIPT

**Event:** Andrew McKellar interview with Sarah Harris and Tristan MacManus, Studio 10.

**Speakers:** Sarah Harris and Tristan MacManus, co-hosts Studio 10; Andrew McKellar, chief executive Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

**Date:** 15 February 2022.

**Topics:** Rural and regional businesses, shadow lockdown, Omicron variant, international border reopening, backpackers and working holidaymakers.

## E&OE

**Sarah Harris, co-host Studio 10:** Joining us now is the CEO of the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Andrew McKellar. It's good to see you this morning. Thanks for being with us. How quiet is it exactly in the regions? What are you hearing? What are you seeing?

**Andrew McKellar, chief executive Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry:** Yes. Well, good morning, Sarah, and good morning, Tristan. Great to be with you. Look, it's a big challenge in our rural and regional areas. At the moment, they are continuing to face quite intense pressure as a result of the Omicron surge. And really, through at least two or three years they've had a double whammy or a triple whammy; they had bushfires, they've had a drought, in some cases as well they've had to deal with flood and, of course, they've had to deal with the pandemic over the past two years. What they're dealing with at the moment in many cases is much like a shadow lockdown. So, people are not going out there, they're not comfortable to go to the shops, and as a result, many businesses are really suffering.

**Tristan MacManus, co-host Studio 10:** It really is a shame. It's been widely reported that Omicron is a milder illness. Now it sounds as though everyone and the reason they're just doing what they've been told to do for so long and not being updated on it, but what is it that people are so afraid of?

**Andrew:** Oh, it's very serious. I mean, the reports of it being a milder illness, maybe that's one thing, but we are still seeing very significant rates of transmission. The wave is perhaps passing through its peak, but just on those numbers that we heard in the news, there are still people getting very seriously ill, and there are still a lot of fatalities. So people, of course, naturally are cautious, and that is impacting on economic activity out in the regions. So we're seeing something that is akin in many of those areas to a shadow lockdown, and businesses are suffering as a result, particularly smaller businesses, retailers, hospitality, restaurants, cafes. They're really struggling in a lot of those parts of Australia.

**Sarah:** Yeah, the side effect of Omicron is that these businesses are now on life support; how are they surviving? What sort of financial support should they be able to access? What would you like to see?

**Andrew:** Well, look, there are some measures in place in a couple of places, New South Wales, Victoria. There have been state government packages of support. It hasn't been anywhere near the level that was available in the first stages of the pandemic, ironically. So look, that is an ongoing issue. We haven't been able to get combined federal-state support at this time. I think that is an issue; the longer this goes. We don't want to do long-lasting damage to the economy. So look, it's a real pressing challenge at the moment for many of those rural and regional economies. I think going forward, one of the things that will help will be the reopening of the international borders, which is occurring on the 21st of February. But again, it will take time to get people coming back in to get tourists arriving. Another factor is getting backpackers, working holidaymakers, back out into the regions, and that's just starting to occur now.

**Sarah:** All right, well, thank you, Andrew McKellar, for joining us this morning, we really appreciate it, and hopefully, those rural and regional areas can get back to their former glory as soon as possible. Thanks again.

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