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Don't take our doctors, farmers urge

The NSW Farmers' Association has expressed apprehension over suggestions that incentive programs for rural doctors across Australia may be removed from the Federal Budget.

NSW Farmers' Association President Jock Laurie says the indication that the rural doctor's incentive program may be lost raises major concerns for the future of health services in rural areas.

"Rural and regional areas are already under-represented when it comes to medical and health services, and to jeopardise future services would be a travesty," Mr Laurie said.

"Unfortunately, that is exactly what stands to happen should such medical incentives be lost.

"For some communities, particularly those in the most remote areas, the incentives are a key support for doctors to either move to, or remain in, the regions.

"Should such incentives be taken away, rural communities face the prospect of losing these invaluable medical services," Mr Laurie said.

Under the current program, which has been in place since 1991, rural doctors are paid incentives in addition to their normal salary as an encouragement to relocate to and work in country areas.

"Rural communities already face a doctor shortage, and local residents already have to travel vast distances or endure long waiting times in order to see medical professionals," Mr Laurie said.

"Axing incentive payments will only add to this, further impacting the health of these communities," Mr Laurie said.

The Association's comments come following reports that a spokesperson for the Federal Health Minister said the current incentive system is 'broken' and needs to be 'reformed', with the indication that this may occur under the upcoming Federal Budget process.

According to Mr Laurie, the Association is concerned that such 'reform' may actually lead to the removal of the incentives program without a suitable alternative.

"The Association is calling on the Government to provide assurances that programs supporting and encouraging rural doctors will be enhanced not diminished under the Budget," Mr Laurie said.

"There is a need for a range of support measures, including incentives programs, to address the critical shortage of doctors in rural areas," Mr Laurie concluded.

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