

CENTRAL HIGHLANDS

at a glance



With world-class coal reserves and a highly productive agricultural sector, the Central Highlands is a dynamic inland region known for its vibrant communities, natural beauty, and relaxed outdoor lifestyle.

The region plays a key role in global steelmaking and energy supply. Covering a significant portion of the Bowen Basin, Australia's largest coal reserve, it is home to 12 metallurgical and thermal coal mines.

Complementing this industrial strength is a thriving agricultural sector. The Central Highlands supports the largest number of beef cattle in Australia, alongside a diverse mix of broadacre cereals, legumes, cotton, and horticulture. High productivity is underpinned by the region's subtropical climate, fertile black soils, and reliable water supply.

Spanning almost 60,000km², the region is strategically located at the intersection of two major highways, including the Inland Freight Route. Just a three-hour drive west of Rockhampton and a 90-minute flight from Brisbane, it is well positioned to connect with domestic and international networks, services, and markets.

Strong demand for the region's coal and agricultural products, alongside a growing visitor economy, drives a \$14.58 billion Gross Regional Product. This economic strength is underpinned by 3,520 businesses and a skilled workforce of 19,123.



OUR REGION *in numbers*

DEMOGRAPHICS

29,336

Population

The Central Highlands' population reached 29,336 in 2024, a 1.27% increase in one year. This growth is ahead of schedule, already exceeding the 2036 projection of 29,251 from the Queensland Government Statistician's Office.

5,555

Non-resident population

This resident base is complemented by a vital non-resident workforce of 5,555, primarily resource industry shift workers. This number has seen a significant 8% increase since 2023, reflecting a thriving mining sector.

34

Median age

A younger demographic profile sets the region apart, with a median age of 34 years, compared to Queensland's 38 years. Future growth is projected in the 65+ age bracket, highlighting opportunities in aged care and services.

ECONOMY

\$21.67 BILLION

Output

The Central Highlands is an economic powerhouse, generating \$21.67 billion in output in 2024. This marks a 10% increase from the previous year's \$19.72 billion, driven by mining (77%), construction (5%), and agriculture (5%).

\$14.58 BILLION

Gross Regional Product

The region's Gross Regional Product (GRP) has grown to \$14.58 billion in 2024, up from \$12.63 billion. This significant increase is a result of strong export performance and increased private investments.

BUSINESS & WORKFORCE

3,520

Businesses

The Central Highlands is home to 3,520 businesses, 98% of which are small businesses with fewer than 20 employees. Notably, agriculture accounts for 40% of all businesses.

19,123

Workforce

The Central Highlands has a skilled workforce of 19,123, with the largest employers being mining (6,704), construction (1,511), and agriculture (1,907). Notably, 41% work 49 hours or more each week, compared to Queensland's 13.7%.

4.2%

Unemployment rate

In March 2025, the region's unemployment rate was just 4.2%, remaining low over the past five years with an average of 3.7%, highlighting strong and sustained demand for labour.

LIFESTYLE

\$420,000

Median house price - Emerald

Housing in the Central Highlands is more affordable than in metropolitan centres, with Emerald's median house price at \$420,000 and units at \$267,500. Low rental vacancy rates point to strong demand and development opportunities.

The Central Highlands is well-served with essential infrastructure and lifestyle amenities, supporting both residents and future growth.



3

Hospitals
+3 Health
clinics



28

Schools
+CQUniversity



58

Parks &
recreation

INDUSTRY

MINING

Mining is the Central Highlands' largest industry by both output and workforce. It is strongly export-focused, with 88% of production shipped to key international markets including Japan, India, China, South Korea, and Vietnam.

Around 60% of the region's coal is metallurgical, used in global steelmaking, while the remaining 40% is thermal coal for energy generation. This activity is underpinned by a strong local Mining Equipment, Technology and Services sector that supports continued productivity and innovation.

Central Highlands Mines:

- **Blackwater**, Whitehaven Coal
- **Cook**, QCoal Group
- **Curragh**, Coronado Global Resources
- **Ensham**, Ensham Resources
- **Gregory Crinum**, Sojitz Blue
- **Jellinbah**, Jellinbah Group
- **Kestrel**, Kestrel Coal Resources
- **Meteor Downs South**, Sojitz Blue
- **Oaky Creek**, Glencore
- **Rolleston**, Glencore
- **Wilton Fairhill**, Futura Resources
- **Yarrabee**, Yancoal



Discover the Central Highlands Mining Fact Sheet

AGRICULTURE

Agriculture is a productive and diverse industry in the Central Highlands, supported by a skilled workforce and the largest number of small businesses.

The region's competitive edge comes from fertile black soils, reliable water supply from infrastructure like the Fairbairn Dam, and a warm subtropical climate enabling year-round production.

Industry collaboration and research hubs like the Central Queensland Smart Cropping Centre drive ongoing innovation, positioning the region for future growth in agribusiness and value-adding industries.

Central Highlands Commodities:

- **Beef**
\$500m-\$600m
- **Broadacre cropping**
Grains and legumes
\$100m-\$300m
- **Cotton**
\$60m-\$100m
- **Horticulture**
Mandarins and table grapes
\$100m-\$200m

Other commodities: Oats, Barley, Maize, Hay and Forage, Turf, Macadamias, and Avocados



Access the Central Highlands Agricultural Capability Statement

VISITOR ECONOMY

The Central Highlands welcomes 650,000-750,000 visitors each year, generating \$264 million in economic output and supporting more than 1,200 local jobs, primarily in accommodation and food services.

The region's appeal lies in its natural beauty and outback charm, featuring four national parks, the Sapphire Gemfields, and Lake Maraboon.

Peak visitation occurs during the cooler months from April to October, when grey nomads seek out the region's comfortably warm climate. Families are an increasing market, drawn to the region's nature-based experiences.

Central Highlands Attractions:

- **Carnarvon Gorge**
Iconic sandstone gorge, walking trails and rock art
- **Sapphire Gemfields**
One of largest sapphire-bearing fields in the world
- **Blackdown Tableland National Park**
Dramatic escarpments, bushwalks and waterfalls
- Additional attractions: Lake Maraboon, Emerald, Minerva Hills and Nuga Nuga National Parks, gardens, art, and history and heritage



Watch our latest destination video

Photo Credit: Tourism & Events Queensland

MAJOR PROJECTS

The Central Highlands is undergoing substantial development, with completed and proposed projects strengthening employment, infrastructure, and long-term growth. Spanning mining, health, agriculture, and renewables, these initiatives reflect the region's strong economic outlook.

RECENTLY COMPLETED

- **Wilton and Fairhill:** Steelmaking coal mines near Emerald, creating up to 130 jobs using existing infrastructure and supporting regional export capacity.
- **Mammoth Underground Mine:** \$165 million investment at the Curragh Complex near Blackwater, supporting 259 new jobs and expanding long-term mine operations.
- **Blackwater Multipurpose Health Service:** Replacement of the existing facility with a modernised, multipurpose design to enhance access to emergency, acute and aged care services.
- **RDO Equipment Facility:** Multi-million-dollar purpose-built site in Emerald, expanding service capacity and skilled job opportunities in agriculture and construction.



Read the full list of
Central Highlands
Major Projects

PROPOSED

- **Iona Agricultural Precinct:** \$240 million integrated beef processing facility in Emerald, expected to create over 400 operational jobs.
- **Energreen Oilseed Processing Facility:** \$22 million sustainable aviation fuel (SAF) feedstock facility at Yamala Enterprise Area, with capacity for 70,000 tonnes annually and 60 direct jobs.
- **Inland Freight Route & Queensland Beef Corridors:** Part of a joint Australian and Queensland Government investment of more than \$1 billion across seven LGAs to enhance freight and livestock transport infrastructure.
- **Renewable Energy and Waste Gas Projects:** New solar farms and innovative mine-based projects converting waste gas into power and diesel alternatives.

ABOUT CHDC

Central Highlands Development Corporation (CHDC) is the lead economic and tourism development agency for the Central Highlands in Queensland, Australia.

For more than 25 years, CHDC has worked in partnership with industry, business, government, and community to drive growth and empower local enterprise.

We deliver a wide range of services to support regional businesses and industries, including access to grants and tender opportunities, regional data and publications, and a free local jobs board.

CHDC also hosts a calendar of flagship events such as AGTECH, Farm to Fine Dining, and the Central Highlands Business Excellence Awards, alongside regular workshops, networking events, and professional development opportunities.

With a strong focus on collaboration, CHDC is committed to positioning the Central Highlands as a dynamic inland region of choice. We advocate for priority projects, foster innovation, and champion the region's strengths to help create a vibrant, sustainable future for all who live, work, invest, and visit here.

To explore our full range of initiatives, visit chdc.com.au.



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