



Inquiry into the role and potential of the National Broadband Network

Submission from Dr Deb Foskey,

My brief submission to this Inquiry is intended to raise issues related to internet connection in rural and remote areas. Consequently, while I will address most of the ToR, it will be in relation to their application to residents in rural and remote areas.

Introduction

Computer and internet technologies have the potential to add value to the lives of Australia's rural residents. Furthermore, they may make it viable for people to work outside the major cities, thus providing a welcome influx of population to towns and localities that are losing their young people who relocate for higher education and work opportunities. It can enable social contact with distant friends and family and increase access to newspapers unavailable on a daily basis. I personally benefit from all these things, but I am one of a small percentage of people in East Gippsland Shire who make maximum use of the opportunities offered by broadband – currently only available through satellite or telephone connection outside the major towns¹.

My submission is formed by personal experience and observation and augmented through my experience as one of the coordinators at Tubbut Neighbourhood House (TNH) and a member of a Centre for Rural Communities team which prepared an environmental sustainability kit for East Gippsland Shire.

Terms of Reference

A. the delivery of government services and programs

As government services and offices are progressively moved further from small communities to larger regional centres, the internet becomes essential for finding information and accessing services. The low level of take-up of computers in many rural areas, even with the Commonwealth Government's subsidisation of satellite-provided internet connection, means that lack of physical – and even, in some cases, telephone – access to government services is not being complemented by a proportionate growth in use of web sites, email communication and so on. It should be noted that the cost of internet access with adequate levels of allowable data downloads to get full benefit of internet access is beyond the reach of people on pensions and low farming incomes, which are the norm in much of East Gippsland.

Thus, while the delivery of government services and programs via the internet is a useful adjunct and resource for rural people, it does not compensate for the loss of human services. Many rural communities are aging and most elderly people in my area say that they do not wish to own or use a computer. Increasingly, they will need to turn to more computer literate friends to find the information that they need, perhaps, for instance, printing out the relevant forms and information. There are, of course, elderly people who have taken up internet opportunities with gusto but they need computer classes and helpful informed advice to assist them to use their equipment.

¹ At a meeting with Shire officers in December 2009, I was told that East Gippsland has a very low level of computer ownership and that the town with the highest level of wealth – Paynesville – had 33% computer ownership, indicating very low levels indeed elsewhere in the Shire.

Therefore, it is important that, even if reliable broadband access is made available to all people in remote areas, government funding is supplied to assist the services, like NHs, which bridge the gap between the electronic information governments offer and a computer-illiterate community.

Many East Gippsland communities have Neighbourhood Houses and Resource Centres funded by the Victorian Government; all have computers for public access and most offer the expertise to help people use them. Thus, there is assistance and access for everyone who is able to travel to the NHs; but this is an area with no public transport options and not everyone has a private motor car. There will always be a real need for isolated people to have access to computers in their homes and expertise to assist them to learn how to use it in their communities.

B. achieving health outcomes

Rural and remote communities are generally disadvantaged in access to health and medical services and it is unlikely that an increase to on-line services will solve this problem. Nonetheless, they need to have access to carefully targeted services as do all Australian residents.

C. improving the educational resources and training available for teachers and students

Access to higher education is important in rural and remote regions but largely unavailable unless individuals relocate to larger centres. The ability to study on-line and gain accredited qualifications will be of great benefit and possible only with reliable high-speed internet connection, especially for on-line tutorials and other delivery strategies.

In the Tubbut Goongerah area, both primary school campuses have specially installed fibre optic internet connections funded by the Department of Education. It is inefficient that the expensive infrastructure with the capacity to deliver mobile phone reception and broadband connections to local residents is allowed only to service these schools. Children often go home to houses which lack internet access or have only dial-up.

It would seem wise to explore the possibility of extending the reach of this infrastructure in the provision of broadband to remote and rural areas where schools have high quality broadband access.

D. the management of Australia's built and natural resources and environmental sustainability

Landcare and catchment management groups are a major way that rural and remote people can engage in programs to protect natural resources and enhance environmental sustainability. Email is an effective, cheap and immediate way for these groups to communicate. Additionally, individuals can keep up with related issues through email lists and dedicated web sites. The internet can provide examples of other attempts to tackle similar problems.

In preparing the East Gippsland Environmental Sustainability Toolkit, I researched all the community organisations working in areas related to sustainability and the environment. Many of the groups were acting in isolation from other groups and individuals and it became clear that connecting them up, over long distances, was best done through email and internet. People without internet connections were, in a very real sense, out of the loop.

E. impacting regional economic growth and employment opportunities

Internet-based employment will allow some people with appropriate skills to work from home, thus giving them the opportunity to earn an income without moving to larger centres. It will also assist them in finding work.

I am among a small number of people in the area who already perform a substantial proportion of our work from our home computers. This is an area that will grow, allowing lifestyle changes and partially stemming the flow out of rural communities.

H. facilitating community and social benefits

Many things would be easier to organise in this area if everyone used the internet. No doubt this is true of urban as well as rural populations; however, they have fewer impediments to becoming linked-in.

Some examples:

- A Community Supported Agriculture project, to enable people to purchase locally produced food, is in the development process. Where these currently operate, the internet is the primary tool of communication, allowing producers to inform consumers of what is available and for consumers to place their orders.
- A shared transport scheme would partway compensate for lack of public transport through a car-pooling arrangement. Because information is needed at short notice, the internet is the perfect networking tool.

I. the optimal capacity and technological requirements of a network to deliver these outcomes

I do not feel qualified to address this ToR. As a general principle, however, it makes sense to make the best use of existing infrastructure and therefore I recommend that where there is currently exclusive and limited use of existing infrastructure, as with the fibre optic cable system which provides the Tubbut School with fast broadband access, other residents within its reach should be able to access it too. The TNH, for instance, maintains an expensive satellite account although it is only 10 metres from the Tubbut campus of the Goongerah-Tubbut Primary School.