



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'M' or 'M.' followed by a vertical line.

Po Box 1173

Maleny, Q, 4552

10th February 2011

Mr Andrew McGowan
Standing Committee on Infrastructure and Communications
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra 2600

Dear Mr McGowan,

I am writing as a concerned member of a rural community, who has spent a great deal of my life researching and developing rapidly changing networked environments and related services with a focus on their socio-economic and capability building impact. In this era, when the Australian economy is substantially supported by activities, such as mining, in remote and rural regions, I would like to make the following submission to:

The Inquiry into the Role and Potential of the National Broadband Network.

I have recently moved from Sydney to this small regional town in Queensland that is growing and changing rapidly. Like much of Queensland, the access to communication infrastructure is: limited (ADSL2 lines are generally unavailable so video conferencing is not generally satisfactory, mobile phone networks are limited even when subscribing to Telstra, television services are often interrupted, everyone spends time waiting to use EFPOS in shops because existing networks are overloaded, our local exchange has become inadequate for a growing community), fragile (the eroding copper network collapses regularly especially in the wet season interrupting even basic land line phone connections and internet ADSL lines, inadequate mobile phone coverage limits communication and increases risks in accidents and emergencies such as the recent floods), and demand far outstrips the availability of services for our relatively well educated and generally under employed population. Like many small towns we have limited access to retail outlets, entertainment, banks, specialist health services, government services, public transport, and post school education without substantial costs in time, effort, and fuel to reach larger centres on the coast. We use E-bay, internet banking, and distance education when we can. We show films each fortnight in the community owned and volunteer run community hall. We are making the best of these conditions. According to our local government, this town, with these services, has the highest level of internet connection in the Sunshine Coast region and also has the highest level of participation in post school education. **The communication infrastructure is completely inadequate for the aspirations, needs and wellbeing of people living in this second level region**



one hour away from a big city as a basis for broad participation in the evolving Australian culture and economy.

An improved National Broadband Network (NBN) is already overdue infrastructure development in rural and regional areas. This development is increasingly necessary as the weather and the economy become more volatile and adaptability, communication, diversified economies and innovation become more important. This is particularly so in regional and remote areas where there is an increasingly high demand for skilled labour and related services. (See all terms of reference)

The proposed NBN has enormous potential to make it possible for people, and especially young people living outside large cities, to have much better access to the knowledge, experiences, and high quality services necessary for their well being, capability building, and participation in the diverse opportunities presented by the increasingly global economies of this century. In times of change, access to interactive communications becomes a critical developmental factor for social and communication skills, and resilience in the face of complex change, and adaptability. This is especially important for young people with parents who are currently economically disadvantaged and under-employed in rural centres. **The NBN and development of related interactive services and opportunities will strengthen, diversify and stimulate the whole Australian economy (Term of reference e.)**

The cost of not providing these services adequately is already substantial, for government, businesses and the community, in terms of economic development, government planning and the cost of services, poorly co-ordinated public transport, underemployment, skilled labour capacities, social services, mental and physical health, educational opportunity, and levels of participation in the emerging economy (Terms of reference a, b, c, d, e, f, h). Rural areas and their economies are increasingly impacted by those of the wider world. However, access to knowledge about global networks, quality distance education services, recent research, and new ideas is limited for young people and skilled professionals alike. In terms of the digital age and digital economies, services, knowledge and opportunities available in rural areas are an increasingly poor substitute for those in the cities. Contrary to the early expectations of networked communications technology systems, the tyranny of distance within Australia appears to becoming greater, in terms of access and opportunity, rather than less. This is reflected in slower change and capability building in rural and regional areas, greater difficulties in efficiency, compliance and adaptability by small businesses, and very patchy development of computer literacy and interactive communication skills when compared with very rapid uptake and advances on the back of technical change in cities. Rural people, like others living in cities, need access to new opportunities to communicate easily, build their capabilities, access government services and learn to participate competitively in the economy. **With much of the economy and essential supplies dependent on sustainable activities in rural and remote regions, it is in the national interest to take pro-active action to close the widening opportunity gap for people living in those regions.**

Whatever the technical specifications of an effective, fast and affordable NBN, it will potentially provide the infrastructure for these necessary cultural and socially equitable developments and will



herald the real 'education revolution'. **However, realising these benefits will also require new government policy, legal frameworks, and forms of service delivery that reflect the conditions, needs, and opportunities of the 21st century as well as adequate funding, expert support, and creative invention by 'learning leaders' and the people they inspire to become a reality. Better economic and cultural adaptability and innovation are major potential benefits of the best possible interactive communications system in Australia.**

The development of networked communication technologies has been characterised by rapid change and an interactive process that reflects the evolving awareness, capabilities and needs of the people who use them as well as technological advances. In a more volatile global context, rapid change appears likely to continue this century. I am therefore dismayed by the competitive and simplistic arguments in parliament about the 'right way' to create the NBN, the 'right' technology, or the 'right' cost. **The real potential of the NBN is not a single technical infrastructure but a more complex evolving system of evolving technology, evolving policy, and evolving practice that enables the development of new or enhanced capabilities, meets evolving needs, and enables an emerging culture where all people are able to access the system flexibly and use it in diverse ways to share, exchange, negotiate, consult, and freely build on new information, knowledge, skills and practices to create their future(Term of reference i).**

Australia has a long history of punching above its weight in research but failing to apply research effectively in the local economies. An evolving NBN infrastructure has enormous potential to enhance, engage and inspire knowledge flows between universities and research institutions and all sectors of the population as a basis for innovation and entrepreneurial economic opportunity. However in addition to technical infrastructure, such knowledge flows need to support substantial changes in the government policy frameworks and practices to enable leadership from government in pro-active sharing of public information, increased opportunity to communicate about and creatively build upon new information and knowledge to maximise the ways it is creatively applied in the economy (Term of reference g).

Broad integration of an effective NBN and interactive information sharing and licensing frameworks, such as the Creative Commons platform, within and between the public (including government, universities and research institutions) and private sectors, and involving the media and broader community has enormous potential for economic expansion, social, political, and cultural development and evolving practices for sustainability in the face of climate and economic changes (Terms of reference e, g, d, f)

In the short term, most people in our region either own or are employed by small businesses (97% of registered businesses in the region employ less than 5 people). Economic research suggests that enabling small businesses stimulates the economy and creates jobs in ways that are cost effective and support emerging innovation and flexibility. Recent discussions about rebuilding Queensland after the extreme weather events have stressed:

- The priority of enabling small businesses as a means to rapidly restoring livelihoods in local economies



- The imperative to adapt to the changing environment.

Many of the people living here are professionals or food producers for whom access to information is critical for adaptation, economic success and effective and sustainable service delivery. Thus effective communication services have substantial and immediate potential to expand the scope our economy and enhance the sustainability of the existing services and capabilities of the people who live here. To build a sustainable future, we also urgently need better access to distance specialist health, distance education, online shopping, well co-ordinated distribution networks, and other services that could become more broadly available immediately with a fast broadband network if appropriate policy frameworks and incentives were already in place. (Terms of reference a, d, e, f)

For too long the debate about the NBN in parliament and the media has been dominated by technical considerations and technical companies with an interest in the commercial opportunities of the decision making, large companies who generally already have access to strategic knowledge about the latest global communication and information infrastructures, or groups who are currently benefitting economically (or politically!) at the expense of people who have no access to an adequate communication infrastructure and as a result a limited capability to access up to date information, nor the skills and confidence to critique inadequate information, services, or over pricing.

I have researched and tested the enormous potential of networked interactive communication to inspire, connect and mobilise people to learn new things and expand their capabilities in business, communities and the defence forces. This submission is a heartfelt plea to the commission to seriously consider each of the terms of reference and make recommendations that enable all Australians to:

- Have easy affordable access to, maintain, review, and continuously evolve, the best possible technical infrastructure for the NBN
- Evolve the most effective associated policy/legal frameworks so all people can learn, interact and build on knowledge and ideas to compete effectively in the rapidly changing global economy, live sustainably, and deal with climate change
- Have access to, and contribute interactively to quality health, education, cultural, and other government services that support their wellbeing and happiness, and enable them to meet new needs and opportunities creatively in the future.

Yours sincerely,

Kathryn Crawford
Director