

COOMALIE COMMUNITY GOVERNMENT COUNCIL

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Attn: Committee Secretary
Joint Select Committee on Northern Australia
PO Bo 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

RE: Northern Australia Submission.

Council wishes to make a short submission on the current Inquiry on the future of Northern Australia.

Coomalie Community Government Council is a small Local Government Authority 100km south of Darwin straddling the Stuart Highway. It is a rural based council with stations, farms and rural lifestyle blocks. Its main towns are Batchelor and Adelaide River.

Northern Australia has some distinct advantages which are currently untapped. It has significant natural resources and mineral resources which are easily accessible. The temperature in Coomalie area is constant throughout the year. Water is plentiful. These characteristics are important to many businesses. However the major asset of Northern Australia is the proximity to the markets in both Asia and China. Darwin is 4000km closer to these markets than the traditional ports in the south east of the country.

Unfortunately Northern Australia is constrained by some major barriers. Some of these that have been identified and it is hoped that the inquiry will address them. These are:

- **Mobile Phone Coverage.**

There is very poor or zero mobile phone coverage outside of Darwin, Katherine and Alice Springs. There are 2 small community mobile phone towers in the Council area. The maximum service range of these towers is less than 5 km and this reduces rapidly as users come on board. To advance the development of Northern Australia mobile phone coverage should be major priority and greatly expanded.

- **NBN**

Priority areas for the NBN should be rural and regional Australia and particularly for this inquiry Northern Australia. The greatest improvement to the wellbeing and sustainability of small communities is the provision of world class internet. This allows communities to access physical and mental health services, government services, information and allows business to compete on an even playing field. The lack of adequate high speed internet is making small communities less attractive to residents and more uncompetitive for business.

- **Land Title and Access Issues.**

There is a need to develop a comprehensive and consistent, well understood approach to land title and access. The process needs to be simple, "red and green" tape needs to be minimised or eliminated. This

needs to be coordinated at not at cross purposes between agencies. The Commonwealth and State Government should be able to resume or acquire land for purposes of national and state significance. Compensation on fair terms should be a clearly understood. Negotiations should be simple and disputes should not be tied up in the courts.

- **Cost of Goods and Services.**

The cost of living is higher than in other parts of the Australia. This has traditionally been put down to isolation. However as previously, stated Northern Australia is thousands of kilometres closer to many of its major trading partners than Southern Australia.

Northern Ports should be seen as opportunities to not only export goods but to also import goods. This should reduce transport costs of imported goods being shipped from Southern Australia to Northern Australia, and reduce costs of living.

- **Transport Infrastructure**

The unique climate of Northern Australia presents challenges to road construction and maintenance. Approximately 1500mm of rain falls in the Coomalie region annually. Local and regional roads have traditionally been constructed to meet the needs of the dry season. Road transport during the wet season when the road pavements are saturated is severely limited. Coomalie Community Government Council places a 20 tonne limit on all its sealed roads and 10 tonnes on all unsealed roads during the wet season to protect the infrastructure. These restrictions, unfortunately, reduce the competitiveness of local primary producers.

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission. I look forward to the progress of the inquiry and reviewing the priorities identified for the development of Northern Australia.

Yours Faithfully

Leigh Ashford
Chief Executive Officer
17 February 2014