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Committee Secretary
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Infrastructure and Communications
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

RE: Standing Committee on Infrastructure and Communications

Dear Committee Secretary

Please accept this letter as a submission to the review of the National Broadband Network. This submission is made on behalf of Regional Development Australia Wheatbelt Inc., and relates to items (e) and (h) of the terms of reference; impacting regional economic growth and employment opportunities and facilitating community and social benefits.

1. Organizational Profile

Regional Development Australia (RDA) is an initiative of the Commonwealth government that aims to enhance the growth and development of regional areas by bringing together the three levels of government to provide a strategic and targeted response to issues in regional areas. RDA Wheatbelt is one of the 55 RDA committees representing regional areas across the country.

There are five core functions that underpin the role of the national network of RDA committees:

- 1) Consultation and engagement with local communities and other stakeholders to identify, prioritise and find solutions to issues impacting on the region
- 2) Contribute to informed regional planning
- 3) Contribute to whole of government activities by providing information on regional issues and supporting the implementation of regional programs and initiatives
- 4) Promote Government programs by creating awareness of services, grants and initiatives for regional development, and supporting stakeholders to gain access to these
- 5) Support community and economic development through the identification of opportunities to diversify and expand industry and employment opportunities in the region

2. The Wheatbelt – Western Australia

The Wheatbelt is situated in the south west of Western Australia and covers approximately 155,256 square kilometres extending out to the north, east and south east of the Perth metropolitan area. The population of the Wheatbelt is highly dispersed with over 74,000 people living across 43 shires and 160 towns and smaller settlements. The highest population density occurs in towns closest to Perth and travelling towards the far north and east of the Wheatbelt, there are further distances between towns and a smaller concentration of people.



The Wheatbelt is so called because of its extensive agricultural industry. The region is the primary producer of cereal crops in the state and contributes other agricultural products such as canola, olives, vegetables, wine grapes, honey, citrus fruits and livestock. Whilst agriculture remains the dominant industry, the economy of the region is also supported by mining, commerce, manufacturing, fishing and tourism.

Most Wheatbelt towns are supplied with suitable amenities such as banks, post offices, shopping and recreational facilities. The quality and range of amenities, does however vary significantly between towns, with the larger regional centres having the greatest array of services. The primary social infrastructure in Wheatbelt towns comes in the form of sporting facilities for recreational purposes, while other entertainment and recreational facilities are very limited, even in the larger regional towns. In particular there are very few avenues for engaging in cultural or artistic pursuits.

In 2007 Engineers of Australia provided a comprehensive report card on each state and associated regions on both fixed communication infrastructure and mobile communications systems. In this report known as the "Telecommunications Infrastructure Report Card 2007" rankings were assigned for fixed and mobile infrastructure across the nation. The Wheatbelt region received a ranking of "Inadequate" which was defined as "minimal telecommunications infrastructure and the minimal expectations of the majority of users cannot be met." This assessment is consistent with our view that the region is in need of significant infrastructure upgrades to improve service and eliminate black spots, which are currently limiting social and economic growth in the region.



Figure 1. Wheatbelt Region Western Australia



3. National Broadband Network

According to current information pertaining to the National Broadband Network roll-out (sourced from the NBN Co website), towns with a population of 1000 or that meet other specified criteria, located along the fibre path will receive fibre-to-the-premises connections. A total of 20 town sites within the Wheatbelt have been identified to potentially receive fibre to the home connections, 7 will receive wireless and the remaining 133 localities will be covered by satellite. Based on these estimates only 12.5% of localities in our region will be provided with fibre optic connections to the home. An indicative list of towns identified to receive fibre and wireless connections is as follows:

Fibre to the Premises			
Bakers Hill	Kellerberrin	Pingelly	York
Beverley	Lancelin	Toodyay	Muchea
Brookton	Merredin	Wagin	
Cervantes	Moora	Wongan Hills	
Cunderdin	Narrogin	Southern Cross	
Jurien	Northam	Wundowie	

Wireless	
Bindoon	Gingin
Dowerin	
Dumbleyung	
Wickepin	
Cuballing	
Williams	

The below map (figure 2) provides an indication of the fibre and wireless components of the National Broadband Network for the Wheatbelt (and neighbouring regions). Based on this illustration it appears that where possible towns located along the fibre path will receive the benefits of fibre optic connections, even some with relatively populations. This is very encouraging to see and it also opens the possibility to further expand the scope of connections in our region to other similarly sized towns located along the proposed transit links. A few immediate options are:

- 1) Goomalling, which appears to be along the transit link up to Wongan Hills and Moora. The town has a population of approximately 499 (according to the 2006 census). This locality is currently planned to receive satellite connectivity
- 2) Gingin has a population of 531 (2006 census data) and is located approximately 4.5km off the brand highway where the fibre optic cable to Geraldton has been laid. The Shire of Gingin is one of the fastest growing and developing rural shires in Western Australia, and its strategic location to the immediate north of Perth ensures that it will continue to experience significant growth and change. Currently, Gingin is planned to receive wireless connectivity.
- 3) Bindoon has a population of 740 (2006 census data) and appears to be along or close to the transit link from Northam to Woodridge. Bindoon is experiencing similar population growth to Gingin. Bindoon is currently proposed to receive wireless connectivity



Figure 2. Indicative map of the fibre and wireless components of the NBN for the Wheatbelt. Source: NBN Co.



4. Regional Economic Growth and Employment Opportunities for the Wheatbelt

Access to affordable, high-speed broadband is increasingly essential to the way we communicate and do business. This is particularly the case for businesses and industries that operate in rural and remote areas, where distance is a significant barrier to accessing clients, international and national markets and information on industry advancements.

Recent years have seen significant hardship for the Wheatbelt's agricultural community as a result of an enduring drought. It is not only farmers that are suffering but also the local businesses that rely on farmers for their income. Further growth and development of current industries in the Wheatbelt region and diversification in to others is needed to reduce the reliance on the agricultural industry. Future economic development opportunities exist in mining, mineral processing, agriculture, retail, manufacturing and tourism.

NBN has the potential to broaden opportunities for industry development in the Wheatbelt; however it also had the potential to further restrict businesses in communities not receiving optimal broadband coverage. Currently there is limited private investment in the region and it is unlikely that this will change if investors perceive that the area has (amongst other factors) sub-optimal communications networks. Furthermore opportunities for retail businesses to expand client bases through on-line sale of goods and services will be diminished for those receiving the much slower internet speeds that come with satellite and wireless connections. Many enterprises, across a variety of industries, in the Wheatbelt currently export their products and trade on international markets (e.g. Cambinata Yabbies located in the southern Wheatbelt exports 70% of their product to Asia). For these enterprises to remain competitive and active in the global market they need to be assured of reliable and efficient telecommunications and unfortunately this will not be available to those operating in areas outside of the fibre optic footprint.

Employment opportunities, particularly in professional roles are limited in the Wheatbelt largely due to the nature of our predominantly agricultural industry base. Faster and more reliable broadband could potentially open up opportunities for teleworking arrangements. There are many highly educated and talented people living in Wheatbelt communities and unfortunately a large number of these are currently not employed in their desired profession simply because of the distances some would have to travel to access these employment opportunities. Reliable and low cost internet, whilst not resolving this issue entirely would go a long way to improving possibilities for this group of people.

5. Facilitating community and social benefits

Whilst the Avon-Arc (Shires of Beverley, Brookton, Northam, York, Toodyay, Chittering and Gingin) and coastal areas of the Wheatbelt are experiencing exponential population growth (indications suggest that these areas alone will increase by 20,000 people by 2026), some areas of the central, eastern and southern Wheatbelt have been experiencing a gradual decline in population. This trend could be attributed to the financial hardships being faced by the dominant agricultural industry in this part of the region. With this reduction in population there has also been a decline in service provision, employment opportunities and educational options. This is creating a perpetual cycle whereby people will continue to leave the region because they don't have access to services and services will continue to reduce due to low population. To reverse this trend the region needs to be promoted as a desirable place to live and work.

Key issues affecting regional attraction and retention include employment and career opportunities, perceptions of lifestyle and community, housing, education and training, infrastructure and health services. The NBN has the potential to positively influence many of these factors and in doing so improve attraction to the region. Isolation can deter people from moving to areas like the Wheatbelt but with improved communications it is possible that people will not feel as secluded as before. Improved internet speeds enable more reliable access to communication mediums such as Skype, social networking sites and of course email. Access to entertainment and educational opportunities that may not currently be obtainable in the region will also be more plausible with better internet access. For example on-line training on a range of topics currently not accessible in the region could be offered,



children completing education through SIDE might have access to a great variety of courses and faster download of movies and music for entertainment purposes would be possible.

6. Considerations for NBN

Effective regional development relies on the provision and maintenance of infrastructure. Without adequate power, water, telecommunications and social infrastructure, towns and whole regions will deteriorate, forcing population towards the metropolitan area. Reliable and effective infrastructure is essential to ensure the region can meet the current and future needs of its residents.

The NBN has great potential to improve health, educational, economic and social outcomes for all parts of Australia. Unfortunately it also has the potential to widen the divide between rural/remote areas and more populated regional areas. Whilst it is not financially viable to provide fibre to the premises, connections to all parts of the country, the Government needs to ensure that it recognises and actively works to minimise the potential impacts on areas that will not have access to the high-speed broadband. This includes at a minimum ensuring that the wireless and satellite connections are reliable, consistent and accessible as opposed to the second rate service that is currently experienced in many places.

At present there is a real lack of understanding about what the NBN entails and how it will impact on different areas of the country. It is crucial that communication about the proposed roll-out, particularly to regional areas be improved considerably. It is encouraged that the Government utilise existing regional development bodies such as the RDA network to disseminate information to our respective regions. Utilising these networks would involve minimal expense and effort on behalf of the Government and would ensure that the right messages are getting out to all parts of the country.

Based on current indications it appears that a number of Wheatbelt towns will benefit from the NBN, however if the number of fibre optic sites was to decrease it would place our region at a significant disadvantage. It is imperative to the economic sustainability of the Wheatbelt region that the Government does not revise the fibre pathway to exclude additional communities in our region. We encourage the opposite in fact, and suggest that at a minimum the three town sites mentioned previously (Gingin, Bindoon and Goomalling) are included within the NBN scope.

As a final note, I think it is pertinent for the Government to clearly articulate how will they address inequality in the system (optic vs. wireless vs. satellite) and what strategies they have identified to ensure that already marginalised communities will not be further marginalised with the NBN roll out.

Should you have any questions or require further information please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely

Rebekah Burges
Executive Officer

