Regional
Development
Australia

TOWNSVILLE
AND NORTH WEST
QUEENSLAND INC

11ᵗʰ March, 2011

Mr Andrew McGowan
Inquiry Secretary
Standing Committee on Infrastructure and Communications
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Email: ic.reps@aph.gov.au

Dear Mr McGowan

Re: New Inquiry into the National Broadband Network

On behalf of the Regional Development Australia Townsville and North West Queensland Committee, I write to you to submit our support for the roll-out of the National Broadband Network. RDA's Vision is to achieve a prosperous, sustainable, cohesive and liveable region. Our region covers 15 local government areas of Boulia, Burdekin, Burke, Carpentaria, Charters Towers, Cloncurry, Doomadgee, Flinders, Hinchinbrook, McKinlay, Mornington Island, Mount Isa, Palm Island, Richmond and Townsville accounting for approximately a quarter of Queensland's total land mass. The region contributes strongly to the national economy as a very significant mining, grazing and agricultural area with the majority of product going to export markets.

As identified in our Regional Roadmap, our priorities for building long term sustainability revolve around the creation of jobs and a sustainable economy, building stronger communities and networks and caring for and managing our natural assets. Addressing each priority are strategies and projects that are being reviewed for future development potential. Critical to achieving outcomes is the development of supporting "hard" and "soft" infrastructure.

We believe high speed broadband will be a powerful enabler for developing long term sustainable communities, greater equity amongst communities and individuals in the delivery and access to services, and new opportunities for employment and social connectedness. Critical to this success is the high speed connectivity between regional hubs such as Townsville and rural and remote communities such as those in North West Queensland that frequently rely upon such regional city hubs for health, education, transport, freight and other services. Real time interaction can only be as good as the lowest common denominator speed so equal access to fibre optic cable in as many locations as possible will enable high speed broadband to make a positive impact in areas such as health, education and government service delivery and business to business communications. High speed broadband gives all levels of government an opportunity to ensure our rural and remote areas are not severely disadvantaged.

An Australian Government Initiative

Queensland Government

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The following is a response to the areas of interest listed in the Inquiry.

1. **Delivery of government services and programs**
    a. High speed broadband will ensure greater equity across Australia's communities in regard to access to government services. Federal, state and local governments and communities will be able to communicate more readily using online services including web-based video-conferences, improving the reach, efficiency and productivity outcomes for governments and customers alike. High speed broadband is:
        i. particularly relevant for rural and remote communities such as Normanton, Boulia and the like which suffer from a lack of access to services given they are thousands of kilometres from some government services.
        ii. particularly relevant for communities that are regularly isolated by severe weather events such as floods and cyclones in the north Queensland tropics, Gulf country and Channel Country. As I write, much of the Townsville and North West Queensland region is isolated as a result of flooding causing the closure of national and regional highways yet again this year.
        iii. able to assist local government, particularly in rural and remote areas, to attract and keep staff as they will consider all aspects of a lifestyle in making their decisions about employment locations.

2. **Achieving health outcomes**
    a. Regional Australians are at a disadvantage when it comes to access to health services. High speed broadband will enable greater and more efficient interaction between specialists in regional and metropolitan centres and their patients and local GPs.
        i. Patients and the governments that sponsor patient transfers will reduce their expenditure on travel to specialists and patients will save money and time involved in their travel for specialist appointments. Currently a visit from a remote area to a specialist can often cost in excess of $2,000 for transport and accommodation and a week of time away from family and work.
        ii. Local GPs will learn through the process of being engaged in the discussions between a specialist and the patient, leading to more informed referrals and treatments in the future.
        iii. Student placements in regional areas will benefit from access to high speed broadband links back to the training university.

3. **Improving the educational resources and training available for teachers and students**
    a. Equal access to education for all Australians can only be reasonably provided by access to high speed broadband.
        i. Students in regional areas will gain access to resources such as larger city libraries and online information and online tutorials. For example, many universities now offer online programs, but the unreliability of current broadband services makes access to these minimal in regional areas.
        ii. Teachers will have greater access to professional development, resources for preparing classes and collaboration and support through teacher networks. This is specifically relevant for small rural and remote schools.

4. **The management of Australia's built and natural resources and environmental sustainability**

   a. Much of Australia's wealth is generated from regional, rural and remote communities working in the mining, agricultural, grazing and tourism sectors to name just a few. High speed broadband will enable:

      i. the development of Smart Grid applications to more efficiently manage electricity use to reduce overall demand and hence making a positive impact on the environment and will support the development of new clean, green energy generation between Townsville and Mount Isa

      ii. real time and remote monitoring and management of agricultural and grazing and other commercial properties, roads, parks and community facilities, leading to the ability to respond more quickly to weather and emergency events ensuring safety of people and assets.

      iii. more monitoring for the gathering of information to better understand our natural environment to make more informed decisions in regard to its access, use, management and conservation. For example, more monitoring stations can be positioned to provide real time information from remote sites.

5. **Impacting regional economic growth and employment opportunities**

   a. High speed broadband will encourage the development of new knowledge based employment in information and technology focussed businesses. New opportunities will open up such as data management centres, cloud server services and business process reengineering for companies to streamline operations using the high speed broadband.

   b. Regional cities like Townsville and Mount Isa that will gain an advantage by being located within areas that are in the early roll-out stages of the NBN. This will help the Australian Government achieve its goal of strengthening Australia's regions and the Queensland Government in pursuing its regionalisation strategy and positioning Townsville as the second capital of Queensland.

6. **Impacting business efficiencies and revenues, particularly for small and medium business, and Australia's export market**

   a. It is expected that productivity will increase in all types of businesses as a result of being able to transfer larger amounts of data at a faster speed. Such productivity increases will help build resilience for small and medium sized businesses in particular.

   b. Businesses will be able to communicate more readily with markets, customers and suppliers through web-based video conferences, reducing the tyranny of distance and saving time and money on travel costs (and a saving in emissions) for meetings in Australia and overseas. There are also potential savings in shipping and transport time and costs (and a saving in emissions) by reducing unnecessary movement of stock for sampling if 3D technology can be used.

   c. Businesses will be able to deliver access to training for employees through web-based online delivery from institutions that are thousands of kilometres away. This will help attract and keep staff and save time and money for such businesses.

7. **Interaction with research and development and related innovation investments**

   a. Investment opportunities into projects in remote areas will be enhanced by access to high speed broadband. Mines, power generation such as proposed wind farms,

power transmission such as the proposed Copperstring project will have more effective operational access to head offices, investors, technicians and researchers.

b. Universities will now be able to communicate with researchers, lecturers and students off-campus using the same high speed broadband that they previously had only on campus. This will allow more flexibility in the delivery of classes and collaboration on projects as part of course work. Field work will be enhanced by high speed broadband linkages back to the university.

c. Research institutions, universities and others involved in innovation will be able to connect better with each other, businesses including investors, governments and with communities, not only locally and nationally, but also internationally. This will nurture closer relationships, reduce the silo effect, and lead to faster progress in joint initiatives – such as collaboration on major health research to find solutions for disease prevention and management.

8. Facilitating community and social benefits
    a. High speed broadband will enable:
        i. Easier and faster access to government and non-government organisations' services, especially for those in rural and remote areas
        ii. Building of networks between communities to share more information in addressing issues and finding solutions and will support collaboration

9. The optimal capacity and technological requirements of a network to deliver these outcomes
    a. While not experts in the technical field, we do offer the comments that:
        i. There is a need to allow for significant demand increases driven from the uptake volume and critically the demand for new technologies and services that broadband will enable well into the future
        ii. Back-up redundancy is required to ensure that the failure of one part of the network can be managed through an alternate delivery route
        iii. The greater the access to the optical fibre solution, the greater the real equity will be for all Australians. For some communities to access only 12Mbps while others can access 100Mbps will lead to a severe digital divide. While we understand the economics of reaching 100% of the population, it seems unfathomable that communities such as McKinlay Shire and Richmond will have fibre optic passing through their communities but without an automatic agreement with the NBNCo and Government to provide the linkage into their communities.

Currently the Townsville and North West Queensland region is not well served in terms of quality and reliability of telecommunications services.[1] Hence our communities are ready to embrace the opportunities that the NBN roll-out and high speed broadband will deliver.

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[1] Refer to Appendix 1

We are excited by the opportunity of Townsville being a first release site with the subsequent second and volume stage releases across our region. Our only concern remains with the intention for fibre optic cable to pass Julia Creek and Richmond but not connect them. Given they are an important part of a $13 billion regional economy and located centrally on the Mount Isa to Townsville corridor which is targeted for significant investment in energy transmission, new green energy generation and mine development, we urge you to consider providing equal access for the communities of McKinlay and Richmond.

We will be pleased to provide further comment as appropriate.

Yours Sincerely

Ron McCullough AM
Chairperson

Appendix 1

Information sourced from the Telecommunications Infrastructure Report Card 2007, prepared by Market Clarity and Engineers Australia

A = very good
B = good
C = adequate
D = poor
E = very poor
F = inadequate

Figure 5: Fixed Infrastructure Rankings, Queensland

Figure 6: Mobile Infrastructure Rankings, Queensland