# REGIONAL TELECOMMUNICATIONS REVIEW

38 Sydney Avenue
Forrest ACT 2603

Locked Bag 7001
Manuka ACT 2603

Freecall 1800 064 851
Fax 02 6271 1580

www.rtirc.gov.au
secretariat@rtirc.gov.au

Mr Stephen Palethorpe
Committee Secretary
Select Committee on the National Broadband Network
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
CANBERRA  ACT  2600


Dear Mr Palethorpe

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Select Committee on the National Broadband Network (NBN). The following is the Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee's (the Committee) submission.

The Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee
The Committee was established by the *Telecommunications (Consumer Protection and Service Standards) Act 1999* (the Act) to review the adequacy of telecommunications services in regional, rural and remote parts of Australia.

The Committee comprises Dr William Glasson AO as Chair; Ms Alexandra Gartmann; Mr Mark Needham; Councillor Bruce Scott; and Mrs Josephine Stone AM. In 2008, the Committee conducted an extensive public meetings program throughout regional Australia. During this process the Committee consulted consumers, industry and all levels of government on issues relevant to telecommunications in regional areas. The Committee's report, titled *Framework for the Future*, was tabled in Parliament on 15 October 2008. A copy of the Report is enclosed and a copy of the Government's March 2009 response is at Attachment A.

Key Messages of the Review
The Committee received over 220 submissions to a discussion paper and held 20 public meetings across Australia.

The Review found that there were a number of areas which the Commonwealth could focus its future efforts to improve telecommunications in rural and remote Australia.

The Review made a number of recommendations in respect of:
- Collaboration between jurisdictions;
- Use of telecommunications services to improve education, health and emergency services;
- Promotion of competition;
- Improving consumer protections; and
- The National Broadband Network.

Telecommunications can play a key role in regional Australians' social, cultural and economic wellbeing by facilitating greater social inclusion and participation.

*Collaboration*
A key message of the Report was the need for regional Australia's telecommunications issues to be addressed through a collaborative approach between all levels of government, and for governments to work in partnership with the telecommunications industry and consumer groups on particular issues.

In response to the Review, the Commonwealth identified a number of areas that it could collaborate with state and local governments and non-government organisations. An example of an initiative to maximise the effectiveness of Commonwealth and state/territory expenditure is the Indigenous Communications Program. Through this program, a National Partnership Agreement has been established between the Australian, State and the Northern Territory Governments to deliver public internet access and training in remote Indigenous communities. This has allowed the different jurisdictions to coordinate their efforts to improve Indigenous telecommunications rather than operating independently, and potentially at cross-purposes.

*Adequacy and use of telecommunications services*
The Review identified the importance of telecommunications in their own right, and the contribution that telecommunications make to social, economic and quality of life outcomes. These include support for education, health and emergency services provided through telecommunications, which enhance the wellbeing of regional Australians.

An example of the Government's activity in this area is the Digital Regions Initiative, which seeks to improve delivery of important services in regional Australia through co-funded innovative digital economy initiatives with state, territory and local governments. This initiative comprises of:

- Ambulance Mobile Connect in South Australia which will provide vehicles with mobile computing terminals connected via a high speed mobile network.
- Health e-Towns in the Northern Territory which will deliver ICT enabled health, education and training services for 17 remote towns.
- Bushfire Spotting and Response technologies in North East Victoria which will use remote cameras, telemetry and video

conferencing to enhance fire detection, management and response capability.

- Chronic Disease Management systems in the Hunter New England region in NSW which will increase coverage of facility based telehealth services.
- Bushfire prediction technology project in Western Australia will provide communities which with bushfire alerts and access to simulation maps.
- Connected – Any Student, Any School project in Tasmania which will deliver practical, hands on global e-learning programs to schools.
- The CDM-Net health project in Barwon, Victoria and Queensland which will assist in developing and managing a chronic disease care plan for patients.

The Review noted the increasing use and importance of mobile telephony to all Australians. At the same time, not all of Australia's landmass has terrestrial mobile coverage – it is not commercially viable for the mobile carriers to reach the large expanses of country with low levels of population or through traffic. People outside of terrestrial coverage have to rely on alternative services such as satellite phones which are substantially more expensive than mobile phones.

In March 2009, the Government announced $11.4 million in new funds to continue and enhance the *Satellite Phone Subsidy Scheme*. This Scheme improves the affordability of mobile communications for people living and working in areas without terrestrial mobile coverage by providing subsidies for the purchase of satellite phone handsets. The enhancements included: an increase in the subsidy level for people who live in areas without access to terrestrial mobile phone coverage, from 60 per cent of the handset to 85 per cent; and the ability for health and emergency service organisations to access additional handsets if they can demonstrate a need. Previously these organisations could only access two subsidies.

*Promotion of competition*
The Review identified the importance of telecommunications competition in providing a better range of more affordable services to regional consumers. If competition can not be extended to regional Australia then there needs to be a mechanism that conveys the benefits of competition in metropolitan Australia to rural and regional Australia.

The Committee was extremely heartened by the Government's December 2009 $250 million investment in competitive regional backhaul. Enhancing backbone competition will encourage broadband and telephony providers to improve the range, quality and prices of the services they offer in regional areas. The six priority locations receiving competitive backhaul are:

- Emerald and Longreach, Queensland;
- Geraldton, Western Australia;
- Darwin, Northern Territory;
- Broken Hill, New South Wales;
- Victor Harbor, South Australia; and
- the South West Gippsland region, Victoria.

*Consumer Protections*

The Review found that consumers were not sufficiently aware of the protections available to them or the mechanisms available to make complaints. In its report, the Committee recommended a range of improvements to customer service standards for key telecommunications services.

The Government responded that it would follow up on these recommendations once the NBN is further progressed, but in the meantime has introduced a number of reforms to the telecommunications regime.

The *Telecommunications Legislation Amendment (Competition and Consumer Safeguards) Bill 2009* includes reforms to the Universal Service Obligation, the Customer Service Guarantee and Priority Assistance. It also contains measures to support greater competition in the telecommunications market and gives additional powers to the Australian Communications and Media Authority to help it more effectively regulate the telecommunications industry.

*National Broadband Network*

The Report emphasised the importance of telecommunications services in facilitating the social, economical and cultural wellbeing of people and enable the growth and development of communities and regions as a whole. The Report noted that "the Australian Government's proposed NBN will increase the available broadband services to many people in regional Australia."[1] The Committee maintains its view that the NBN has the potential to transform many aspects of telecommunications service provision in regional areas. The Committee has expressed its belief in the NBN roll-out build to be 'from an outside in' approach.

Conclusion

The availability of backhaul and high speed broadband services will see regional, rural and remote communities provided with greater opportunity to participate in Australia's social, cultural and economic life. While there is further work to be done, the Committee believes the NBN will play an important role in supporting this outcome.

The Committee would appreciate the opportunity to present formally to the Select Committee on the National Broadband Network as part of its consultation process. If this is possible, please contact the Committee's Secretariat on secretariat@rtirc.gov.au who will make the necessary arrangements.

Dr William Glasson AO

31 March 2010

---

[1] *Framework for the Future*, Report of the Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee, Department of Broadband, Communications, and the Digital Economy, Canberra, September 2008.