



# Mareeba

## SHIRE COUNCIL

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To Whom it May Concern

### ***SUBMISSION - NATIONAL BROADBAND NETWORK ROLLOUT***

The adoption of communication technologies is critical to the future economic development of the Mareeba Shire and its regional liveability, as would be the case in regional communities across Australia. The shire's estimated resident population of 21,833 is dispersed across 53,457 km<sup>2</sup> resulting in a very low population density of 0.4 persons/sq. km compared with 2.6 persons in Queensland (ABS ERP June 2015). Mareeba, with a district population of 10,181, is the main commercial and administrative centre and lies 64 km south west of Cairns (ABS 2011 Census, Usual Residents). Most of the shire's remaining population reside in and around smaller towns and districts. It attracts 349,000 visitors each year (Tourism Research Australia, 2015) as well as approximately 900,000 to Kuranda (Tourism Kuranda, 2017). The Shire borders two World Heritage areas and Cairns, an internationally recognised destination with an international airport.

This submission outlines the shire's key needs and opportunities to demonstrate the critical importance of the effective roll out of the NBN to the sustainable future of its residents and businesses.

#### **a. Expansion and diversification in the agriculture sector**

Agriculture is the largest industry in the Mareeba Shire in terms of gross domestic product as well as employment. Apart from the commercial centre of Mareeba, outlying districts are primarily agricultural communities with the main crops being sugar, fruit and vegetable growing as well as beef. Agricultural diversification, identified through extensive community consultation for the *Tablelands Community Plan 2021* was identified as one of the highest priorities for these communities. The agriculture industry in the Mareeba Shire has the highest employment rate of all sectors (14.6%); and higher still at a district level e.g. Dimbulah, 50 km west of Mareeba, with 36% employment in the agriculture sectors (ABS 2011 Census).

The agriculture industry faces rapid technological advancements and the shire's agriculture communities will need to keep pace. The underpinning communication infrastructure to utilise these new technologies is critical for future industry competitiveness. The technological trends in this sector include unstaffed aerial vehicles or drones, mechanisation, automation and remote

sensing. Without the necessary communication infrastructure industries such as the agriculture sector will be unable to compete on a level playing field as new net-enabled technologies could increase productivity by 50 per cent over the next 20 years (CSIRO 2014). These factors will define the future of agriculture communities such as those in the Mareeba Shire.

**b. Connectivity for visitors**

Industry research has demonstrated continuing growth in use of the Internet by visitors for trip planning, both pre- and post-arrival. In 2010 71% of international holiday visitors were likely to use the Internet for information. Between 2006 and 2010 this increased annually by 7.2% (32% over the period) (Tourism Research Australia, 2011). Mareeba Shire is in an exceptional position to increase its visitation as it borders the regional centre of Cairns in Tropical North Queensland which is visited by more than two million visitors each year, the second highest visited region in Queensland. While the Shire already attracts 900,000 day visitors to Kuranda and 349,000 to the Mareeba Shire two trends can be identified that are likely to increase these numbers: a recent increase in private investment in visitor accommodation (enabling longer stays) and growing visitor interest in authentic outback and inland sub-tropical experiences, and cultural heritage.

**c. Investment in regional and rural communities**

Improvements in communication technology encourage private and public investment in regional and rural communities. In the case of Mareeba, the township is developing as a regional logistics and services hub with national companies expanding their operations to Far North Queensland, based in Mareeba e.g. Lindsay Rural, Visy and Orora Group. Also in the last eighteen months the Queensland and Commonwealth Governments have invested \$18 million in upgrades to the Mareeba Airport, to be the second-largest airport in the region. It will support the general aviation industry (maintenance and repairs for international flight companies) which faces unrenewed leases at the Cairns Airport general aviation precinct. Due to its geographical advantages, Mareeba attracts businesses that service agriculture precincts throughout Far North Queensland. The Shire strategically borders all major inland and coastal far northern locations, with the exception of the Cassowary Coast. Also, the township of Mareeba is at the centre of major transport routes that connect these regions to markets along the eastern seaboard of Australia. Additionally the shire township has a sound supply of agricultural and industrial land that does not suffer the environmental constraints of coastal development while also enjoying the amenity of a nearby coastal city lifestyle. It has experienced 30% residential growth in the last 20 years (Cummings Economics, 2017). These factors demonstrate the demand for contemporary communication technology and therefore the need for effective NBN roll-out to enable this investment.

Recent investments include:

- Relocation and expansion of national packaging manufacturing (Visy Boxes and Orora Group) and transport and logistics companies (Lindsay Transport and Blenner's Transport)
- Agriculture suppliers and agronomy expansion i.e. Elders, Combined Rural Traders, Lindsay Rural and Landmark
- Expansion of the Tablelands Mill by MSF Sugar Limited and diversification to biofuels
- Continued expansion and diversification of agriculture production e.g. avocado, niche fruits
- Proposals for solar farm and large-scale ecotourism development

Mareeba Shire Council is focused on enabling the strategic infrastructure which will fuel sustained economic growth. This is supported by the Mareeba Shire Council Planning Scheme 2016 which became effective 01 July 2016. Communication technology is a key component of improving essential infrastructure for all growth. In terms of future growth of the agricultural sector in Northern Australia CSIRO has advised the Commonwealth Government that five to seventeen million hectares have been identified for having the potential for agricultural purposes. This includes the areas in Cape York and the Gulf of Carpentaria which utilise Mareeba as a commercial hub and the Shire's road network.

Combined with the expected tripling of Asia's middle class by 2020 and Australia's Free Trade Agreements signed in 2014 with the major trading partners of China, Japan and South Korea, there is great expansion potential for the agriculture industry provided it has access to the technology to expand and diversify, create production efficiencies and enable innovative operational practices.

**d. Improving liveability in regional and remote communities.**

The flow-on effects to shire residents from regional investment and industry expansion and diversification are improvements in the shire's liveability - standards of living, jobs and housing and accessible services. Mareeba Shire comprises remote and rural districts as well as two main commercial centres of Mareeba and Kuranda. Meeting these lifestyle expectations encourages rural and regional living, reducing the demands on coastal and city development. For example, Mareeba residents are able to access tertiary education (available in Cairns) by combining online access with classroom delivery; and increased employment opportunities are created with businesses that are able to base themselves in regional areas. The liveability in Mareeba Shire would benefit from improvements in communication technology in the following ways:

- Delivery of online health and education services, a community priority
- Growth opportunities for local agricultural producers would create significant community benefits as well as improve the Shire's socio-economic profile through increased income
- Improved communication for disaster management
- Social connectivity.

The broader and long term economic and social benefits of communication technology to the Mareeba Shire have been demonstrated, also the expanding digital needs of the shire. The roll out of the NBN will be a major factor in the future of Mareeba Shire and its residents.

Thank you for the opportunity for Mareeba Shire Council to make this submission. Should you wish to discuss any aspect of this matter further, please contact Council's Senior Engagement Officer

Yours faithfully

**PETER FRANKS**  
CEO