



WEST WIMMERA SHIRE COUNCIL

24 May 2017

Mrs Lucy Wicks MP

Chair

Joint Standing Committee | Rollout of the National Broadband Network

Nbn.joint@aph.gov.au

Dear Mrs Wicks

West Wimmera Shire Council (WWSC) appreciates the opportunity to provide a submission to its inquiry into the rollout of the National Broadband Network (NBN). Council acknowledges the NBN Joint Standing Committee in allowing a late submission to the inquiry.

The realisation of digital connectivity is essential for future economic development in West Wimmera. Beyond workforce participation enabled by remote working, reliable, high-speed regional broadband offers a host of current and future benefits that will underpin sustained economic activity in West Wimmera. These include precision agriculture, telemedicine, remote education, better emergency management, better water management, and more efficient energy generation, distribution, storage and use.

West Wimmera, Victoria is situated 450 kilometres from Melbourne. Its major townships are Kaniva and Edenhope. The area covers 9,265 square kilometres, and has a population of approximately 4000 people. The communities are resilient and vibrant, with a vision of sustainable and connected businesses and communities. Kaniva was initially deemed suitable for a fixed fibre service, however when the final NBN rollout plan was released, the service has changed to the Sky Muster satellite.

Kaniva is an ideal site for a fixed fibre service; the service is currently available in the neighbouring town to the West (Bordertown) and is scheduled to be available in the neighbouring town to the East (Nhill). Kaniva is situated directly on the Western Highway, on the main optic fibre trunk. With a population of over 1,000 Kaniva would seem an obvious location for the installation of the fibre network.

Supporting high speed broadband is strongly embedded as a priority in our local and regional strategies which specifically target economic diversity and the strengthening of education, health, tourism and agriculture. Build of the NBN in Kaniva will provide unique and tangible returns to the community, contributing towards meeting its social, economic and environmental needs with the likelihood to reduce disadvantages such as unemployment and access to services, and create dynamic and sustainable growth in the area.

Many regions of Australia remain, by and large, strongly connected to the performance of the agricultural sector.¹ Agriculture is the largest industry in West Wimmera in terms of gross domestic product as well as employment. Agricultural diversification, identified through extensive community consultation in the West Wimmera Shire Council Economic Development Action Plan 2016-2018, was one of the top priorities for the community. Over 50% of the shire's employment stems directly from agriculture, with most other employment indirectly related to this industry.

West Wimmera has an abundance of food and fibre producers, providing high quality exports domestically and internationally (regional exports total nearly \$200M). Examples of large investments in this industry across the shire include:

- Awassi sheep breeder
- Carrot producer
- Fruit and nut growers
- Chickpea, lentil, durum wheat and bean crops.

The agricultural industry is facing many challenges now and in the near future; none more so than with the technological advances. These developments have the potential to transform the industry, provide even more employment and opportunity through diversification and increase productivity by 50% over the next 20 years (CSIRO 2014). Evolving farming technology is helping Australia's farmers become more efficient, in order to remain competitive in a complex global market place. This is appropriate given agribusiness is identified as one of Australia's future growth industries – and one that will be underpinned by innovation.

Information is critical to a farmer's decision making and consequently to a farm's profitability. The ability to monitor and evaluate a farm's operation in real-time can provide vast productivity benefits. The uptake of digital technologies and the application of big data to farming have been strong within West Wimmera; the digital disruption of the agricultural sector is viewed as an opportunity, rather than a threat.

It is not just the on-farm application of technology that is evolving. So too is the management of rural businesses. Quality telecommunications not only underpin basic communications (such as emergency calls), but everyday activities such as online banking, weather information, trading crops and livestock, online learning, webinars and the maintenance of livestock traceability systems.

From a renewable energy perspective, WWSC has recently received a commitment from a solar energy enterprise to trial a new solar powered ground water extraction and purification facility in Kaniva, which could provide potable water to the township. The current lack of a potable water supply to the town is a health risk and is an impediment to retaining existing, and attracting new, residents. This project has the potential to expand to include generation of power, which could entice existing businesses to expand and new businesses to set up in Kaniva. Without reliable telecommunications, this investment will stall.

The liveability of Kaniva and surrounds would benefit from improvements in digital connectivity by:

- The delivery of online health and education services
- The flow-on effect of increased agricultural productivity would improve the socio-economic profile of the community
- Improved communication for emergency management
- Social connectivity.

¹ Transitioning Regional Economies (initial report), Productivity Commission, 2017

The opportunities and prospects for change and growth for regional communities depend on a range of factors, many of which relate to the unique attributes of a region, such as its geographical location and proximity to other communities and markets, its endowments of natural resources and attractions, and the skills of the local population. Others relate to forces that are external (and beyond the control of the community), such as advances in technology.²

As has been highlighted in the Commission's Telecommunications Universal Service Obligation inquiry, quality broadband services are critically important to a region's integration with other parts of Australia and the world. Reliable telecommunications infrastructure has the potential to attract and develop new industries, and diversify the economy of West Wimmera into the future.

Although mandated to deliver a minimum speed requirement to every Australian, there is no guarantee or accountability given by NBN Co to deliver reliable, affordable and equitable services. The rollout of nbn™ Sky Muster has been plagued with problems and reliability issues – as attested to by numerous local residents/ businesses. It has failed to deliver 'service quality and continuity for consumers in regional areas'. Issues include poor speeds, dropouts, high latency, weather issues, unreliable service, congestion and restrictive data allowances.

WWSC urgently seeks consideration for Kaniva to be included on the rollout plan for a fixed fibre service to the National Broadband Network. Our need as a shire is based on the exceptional combination of social, economic and environmental challenges we face and the significant opportunity that consistent and accessible high speed broadband presents to address challenges and maintain a reasonable quality of life for residents of Kaniva. Should Kaniva be considered for a fixed fibre service and it be deemed unachievable, WWSC asks that a fixed wireless service be looked at.

WWSC has discussed this issue both with NBN Co representatives and various Federal Government parliamentarians, to no avail. We have been advised by NBN Co that the matter is one of the government, and vice versa. Intervention at the political level is required, for this matter to be resolved.

Yours sincerely



David Leahy
Chief Executive Officer

² Transitioning Regional Economies (initial report), Productivity Commission, 2017