

**Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories:
Availability and access to enabling communications infrastructure in Australia's external territories**

Submission by Benjamin Howard, January 25, 2021

Background

My late grandparents lived on Norfolk Island for nearly 30 years. I have visited there many times and have a great respect for and love of the island.

In 2016 I unsuccessfully advocated for the Australian Government to commission a cable link to Norfolk Island while the Hawaiki cable between the USA and AUS/NZ was being planned. Hawaiki, while constructing a cable which runs <100km from Norfolk island, presented a technical and commercial option to Norfolk to install a branching unit for the island but unfortunately this option was not taken at the time.

In 2017 I made a submission to the Joint Standing Committee on the NBN advocating the NBN utilise Norfolk Island's existing fixed line infrastructure including the island's cable station to provide the island with greater service and social/economic opportunities than could be provided by the Skymuster satellite. I request that this 2017 submission to the NBN JSC is read in conjunction with this submission as it provides vital context and information directly relevant to the 2021 inquiry (If my 2017 submission is not attached then a link is included below).

As it transpired, the NBN serviced Norfolk only via Skymuster which can not cover the full range of telecommunications needs of the island. By providing free NBN Skymuster dishes in competition with the existing Norfolk Telecom service (provided by the O3b Satellite), the NBN has also resulted in a further under-funding of maintenance and investment in telecommunications assets on the island.

The missed opportunity of connecting Norfolk Island to an undersea cable running so close to it occurred at the same time Australia was committing hundreds of millions of dollars funding cable links to some of its Pacific neighbours including PNG and the Solomon Islands, recognising the importance of such connectivity for social, economic and security reasons.

Current Position

Norfolk Island has faced significant economic challenges recently with the GFC, subsequently exacerbated by the ending of self governance on the island, the introduction of Australian regulations and taxes, loss of philatelic revenue, and now the more recent COVID impacts. The island's economy has been smashed due to limited tourists, limited flights to and from the island, limited cargo services to the island, uncertainty about future administration of the school, the failure of many shops and commercial ventures and the recent insolvency of the council. This is despite significantly increased Australian government expenditure on the island for cruise ship infrastructure, Border Force, increased Medivac flights, COVID projects and general administration overheads.

Recommendation

There are at least two cable companies that have existing or planned cables within reach of Norfolk Island (<https://www.hawaiki.co.nz> & <https://www.southerncrosscables.com>). Both companies

indicated to me in December 2020 that regarding a cable connection to Norfolk Island the potential to enter a dialog with an appropriate stakeholder such as the Australian Government still exists in 2021. For example, Hawaiki did implement a branching unit for New Caledonia which is ~400km from Norfolk Island, and a relatively short spur off the New Caledonia branch may be proposed to connect to the existing cable station on Norfolk Island. Hawaiki conveyed to me that there is a window of opportunity for Norfolk to secure this option before the New Caledonia branch design is finalised. At this stage it is expected to finalise the design of the New Caledonia branch in Q2/2021 so a decision for Norfolk will be needed by then not to miss the opportunity again.

While requiring a longer (and likely more expensive) cable spur to connect than was presented in 2016, the need for good telecommunications has never been so great. I strongly recommend the Australian Government invest in the provision of a cable link to Norfolk Island's fixed-line and mobile services. Such a link would provide long-term world-class telecommunications for the island enabling quality communications for residents and tourists, competitive online promotion and operation of existing and new business enterprises on the island, access to a much higher standard of remote educational and health resources, among many other advantages that many of us take for granted.

2017 submission to the Joint Standing Committee on the National Broadband Network (NBN), Re: NBN's mandated rollout in relation to Norfolk Island

It is highly suggested that the 2017 submission is read in conjunction with this submission as it provides vital context and information directly relevant to the 2021 inquiry. A copy of the 2017 submission should also be attached to this submission if possible.

<http://www.aph.gov.au/DocumentStore.ashx?id=8e5edd1d-06b5-4159-bfaf-3a99c04854c0&subId=509869>