

**Joint Standing Committee on the
National Broadband Network (NBN)**

Inquiry into the rollout of the NBN in rural and regional areas

**Submission by the
Northern Territory Government**

March 2018

NTG Submission to the Joint Standing Committee inquiry into the rollout of the NBN in rural and regional areas

In the Northern Territory Government's submission to the Joint Standing Committee on the National Broadband Network (NBN) of March 2017, the NT Government urged the Australian Government and NBN Co to work with the NT Government to find an equitable solution that will provide more reliable communications for remote residents. This is essential to allow individuals to participate in the digital economy, improve their wellbeing and lifestyle, assist remote businesses to grow, and contribute to the Council of Australian Governments' Closing the Gap commitment to better outcomes for Aboriginal Australians.

The NBN rollout plan and technology mix for the Northern Territory is vastly different to the national picture as the table below starkly highlights.

	Fibre (mtm)	Fixed wireless	Satellite
Northern Territory	65%	6%	29%
Australia	91%	6%	3%

Any opportunity to bring the Northern Territory's outcomes more into line with the broadband services being delivered to the rest of the nation is the only fair and reasonable position for Australia and must be pursued.

Almost half of the 29% of Territorians relegated to satellite services do not have mobile phone access meaning they have no alternative internet access, even using costly mobile phone data.

In the March 2017 submission, the NT Government summarised its position by listing six key issues:

1. The Northern Territory Government will continue to strongly advocate for families and businesses living and working in remote areas of the NT to receive the best telecommunications infrastructure available.
2. As accepted by the Australian Government, better use of existing telecommunications service infrastructure needs to be a part of the solution to broadband connectivity in remote areas of the Northern Territory. This includes working with NBN Co to change its service delivery model for 34 (now 39) remote Northern Territory communities from satellite to a fixed wireless solution, utilising existing fibre technology and infrastructure.
3. The reliability of the satellite solution needs to be addressed by NBN Co and substantially improved, including:
 - o performance – climatic impact on the NBN satellite solution, including network failure and frequent outages due to extreme weather conditions (heavy cloud cover, rain and heat) resulting in poor performance for users;
 - o priority for isolated areas – residents and businesses in remote parts of the Northern Territory, particularly those without choice of service offering, should be given priority to both access and support ahead of those that reside in more populated areas of the country with access to far greater mobile coverage and choice of broadband provider;
 - o engagement – a planned approach to solving the challenges of NBN connectivity in remote Northern Territory areas is vital and includes co-operation between the Australian Government, NBN Co and the Northern Territory Government.
4. Additional broadband capacity needs to be addressed. It is unclear whether further satellites are planned to be launched by NBN Co to meet apparent demand. There are other technologies available for broadband connectivity, including low orbit satellites, and these technologies need to be investigated by NBN Co.
5. End user support needs to be improved, especially in very remote areas. Post-sale support received by farmers and remote businesses must be better aligned with needs. Many remote users have limited IT knowledge and no local assistance available. This needs to be reflected in the standard of service.

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6. Engagement with remote residents and businesses must improve.
7. NBN Co must work with the Northern Territory Government and the Australian Government to find the most appropriate solution for remote residents and businesses.

The NT Government acknowledges that in the 12 months since its initial submission, some changes introduced by NBN Co have been positive and in line with the NT Government's stated position. This includes a doubling of peak and total data limits for users of its Sky Muster satellite service; launch of the 'NBN local' team to improve the customer experience of regional and remote Australians, Sky Muster multicast services trial in schools across the NT; and NBN Co's commitment to expand the coverage of fixed wireless technology in its network to 6% from an earlier target of 4% nationwide.

However, the underlying issues relating to the delivery of an adequate and reliable broadband service to residents and businesses in remote and isolated areas of the Northern Territory remain. The Sky Muster satellite service cannot be the sole solution to serve remote Territorians' needs. Both NBN Co and the Australian Government need to actively and cooperatively develop responsive solutions that meet the needs of the substantial NT population who reside outside urban centres.

Recognising that reliable and affordable telecommunications services provide significant social and economic benefits, the NT Government has been proactive in the provision of telecommunications infrastructure to remote communities. The current co-investment agreement with Telstra is a three-year, \$30 million program to provide mobile phone and fixed line broadband coverage to 17 remote communities in the NT.

This program follows three prior successful jointly-funded remote telecommunications infrastructure programs since 2009 which, in total, have successfully delivered mobile telephone and/or fixed broadband services to around 23,000 residents, or 10% of the NT population.

There are now 39 remote communities in the Northern Territory connected to the national network via optic fibre at the exchange which should be provided with fixed wireless services to utilise existing infrastructure, free capacity on satellite services and provide reliable communications for better service delivery and economic opportunity.

As significant government services are being made available online (by local government councils, the NT and Australian governments), access to adequate telecommunications technology is continuing to become more critical to access these services. This issue will only exacerbate into the future and the digital gap will widen. It is vital that residents and businesses in remote areas are not disadvantaged by limited connectivity or connectivity that is not fit for purpose.

To ensure the best available access for residents in remote communities, the NT Government has lobbied NBN Co and the Australian Government on many occasions to seek a way to utilise the existing optic fibre infrastructure in 39 remote NT communities rather than the technically inferior satellite solution.

This is also in line with NBN Co's commitment to expand the coverage of fixed wireless technology in its network. The existing optic fibre connections would be utilised to provide fixed wireless technology and deliver an NBN user experience to residents in these remote communities similar to that for other Australians.

Additionally, the demands placed on the NBN Sky Muster services will be alleviated by moving significant numbers of users to terrestrial services. The economic cost benefit analysis of this solution should be investigated and reported to the JSC to substantiate the economics of this alternative.

Alternative end user products targeting remote and predominately Aboriginal communities, with input from communities and other stakeholders, needs to be urgently considered by NBN in collaboration with local stakeholders and jurisdictions.

The NT Government will continue to vigorously pursue any option which will improve the living standards of remote NT residents, and enable remote NT businesses to compete and thrive, through provision of modern and fit for purpose telecommunications services.