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Committee Secretary
House of Representatives Standing Committee on
Infrastructure and Communications
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

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By email to: ic.reps@aph.gov.au

Dear Sir/Madam

Inquiry into the role and potential of the National Broadband Network

I would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to provide feedback into this initiative.

Local councils, industry and community members over the past year have been making submissions to the Far North Queensland and Torres Island Regional Development Australia Road Map. Not surprisingly given our location, one of the highest priorities identified was access to the National Broadband Network (NBN).

Our region covers more than 180,000 square kilometres and is shared by approximately 260,000 people. Reliable, consistent and fast internet accessibility is vital in this day and age to support economic development, improve social isolation and reduce the impact on the environment.

Successful delivery of the NBN will spur innovation, economic growth and improvements in daily life for both communities and businesses. Wider deployment and more effective use of digital technologies will enable the nation to address its key challenges and will provide us with a better quality of life through improvements in the delivery of better health care, equitable access to education, cleaner environment, new media opportunities and easier access to governments own services.

We address the terms of reference for this inquiry below:

The delivery of government services and programs

The delivery of all levels of government services and programs will be enhanced by the NBN, in particular by supporting the engagement between government and younger citizens who are increasingly turning to new forms of

social media to interact with their peers and the community.

The aged too will benefit from having access to E-Government services as some services and information will be provided more efficiently and beyond regular hours of operation or location.

Councils within the region have increasingly identified the need for E-Government initiatives such as development applications, and community engagement (particularly for those located on stations and confined to housing/hospice facilities).

Achieving health outcomes

Within Far North Queensland there are a high number of instances where patients cannot be treated 'in place' and they have to travel thousands of kilometres to seek treatment which may only require a 30 minute appointment or less. Having access to high speed communication channels where the patient remains in place and undertakes the appointment through high speed communication channels with video conferencing facilities saves costs and personal stress.

Programs which promote the use of E-health initiatives and Health Management Information Systems (HMIS) will assist with:

- Improving the continuum of care through the integration of hospital care processes,
- Data sharing,
- Providing data for health insurance,
- Statistical purposes, and
- Improving overall quality and standardisation in medical processes.

The overall result will see a marked improvement in the delivery and access to health care and medical procedures which are currently unavailable in regional Australia.

Improving the educational resources and training available for teachers and students

The use of E-learning resources will provide an additional, much needed mode of delivery of education to the current school based system within the region.

The Cassowary Coast region recently conducted a survey on Skills and Training within the region which indicated a desire by employers to provide improved means of accessing training and learning solutions within the local community. E-learning, which is defined by the World Bank as 'the use of computer-based technologies such as the internet, e-mail, websites and CD-ROMs, to deliver, facilitate and enhance both formal and informal learning and knowledge sharing at any time and any place', will provide the region with the equitable access to education which it currently desires.

The management of Australia's built and natural resources and environmental sustainability

This region is surrounded by two world heritage listed natural assets: The Wet Tropics Rainforest and the Great Barrier Reef. Due to our unique environment, we are limited to the number of traditional industries we can support. The NBN has the potential to redefine and increase the productivity of the region through the introduction of new enterprises and initiatives which rely on the internet and faster forms of communication. The region will also be better able to promote the unique environmental attributes and help the nation and world at large understand the diversity and value and the need to preserve this vulnerable asset.

Impacting regional economic growth and employment opportunities

The NBN has significant impact on economic and employment opportunities. As noted above the development of new industries which rely mainly on the internet will thrive and enhance the region's employment and economic output.

Traditional industries will likewise see improvements with more stable and faster access to information thereby improving profitability and productivity. In this day and age the need to be globally competitive in a local context is rapidly changing. The business as usual models are outdated and for the nation to be competitive it must enable its regions to be competitive through the provision of fundamental infrastructure such as that being delivered by the NBN.

Impacting business efficiencies and revenues, particularly for small and medium business, and Australia's export market

Efficiencies and revenues will greatly improve across all types of businesses within regional Australia through the introduction of faster and more stable connectivity of the information and communications technologies. Stability and access to more choice at a fair cost is a must for regional Australia, which is greatly limited by both. Regional Australia produces two thirds of the nation's wealth but is poorly resourced in terms of all types of infrastructure. Projects such as that being delivered by NBN Co. is crucial for the nation to progress towards a truly world class digital economy such as that enjoyed in some parts of Europe and countries like Korea and Singapore.

All forms of exports, whether intra state, inter state and overseas are impacted, but can be easily improved.

Interaction with research and development and related innovation investment

The delivery of the NBN in itself is an innovative step within a national context, which will greatly improve the way in which regions approach innovation. The investment in innovation, research and development will be improved with better access to information and a cross-pollination of ideas from across the nation. The ability to create and support a truly innovative national concept beyond the capital city boundaries is significantly improved with access through a NBN.

Facilitating social and community benefit

The value of access through a NBN is immeasurable. Many of our remote councils find that communication and information occurs through channels such as web, email and phone rather than face to face. Many of our residents do not live near urban centres in order to be able to access newspapers, flyers, meetings etc on a regular basis. The ability to access the internet and information currently is frustrated by the limitations of current infrastructure, if there is any at all. Having access to a reliable and fast source of communication will open the opportunity for them to communicate with those located hundreds if not thousands of kilometres away.

It should also be noted that this region is regularly isolated due to flooding. While communities in the most part are resilient during these periods, having access to regular information and the ability to see and talk to relatives assists with the feeling of social isolation.

New forms of social media and community interaction are borderless and if well risk-managed will provide untold benefit. The provision of traditional library services for example can be improved with libraries providing much more than just access to books and print media.

The optimal capacity and technological requirements of a network to deliver these outcomes

As noted previously, the simple requirements are for a stable network which provides the fastest rate of data interchange, uninterrupted, non-time constrained and location-bound at a fair price to the end consumer.

Should you have any queries, please do not hesitate to contact me on 07 4044 3038.

Yours sincerely

Darlene Irvine
Executive Officer