



**Regional
Development**
Australia
FAR WEST NSW

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Committee Secretary
House of Representatives Standing Committee on
Infrastructure and Communications
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Attention: Ms Sharon Bird MP, Chair

Dear Committee Members

Please accept this submission from the RDA Far West NSW, office in Broken Hill. This input reflects the views of civic and business leaders within the region, including education and health professionals. A teleconference was specifically held on 2 February 2011 at which views were presented by the General Manager of Broken Hill City Council Frank Zaknich, the Mayor of Central Darling Shire Paul Brown, General Manager of Central Darling Shire Tim Hazell, and self employed Broken Hill business operator Hugh Gough. This meeting was facilitated by myself, as CEO of RDA Far West NSW. There were numerous apologies for this teleconference from persons representing services in education, health, law and order.

This submission includes issues raised during this teleconference but predominantly issues that have been raised during the course of the last year. The NBN project is of such significance to the future economic sustainability of this region, that we often quip, that "if the NBN is killed then you must hold a funeral for the Far West of NSW".

The ideas and comments gathered from this region are addressed in the following paper. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you require any further information.

Yours faithfully

Linda Nadge
CEO
RDA Far West Inc



RDA Far West NSW Submission
to the House of Representatives Standing Committee
on Infrastructure and Communications
New Inquiry into the National Broadband Network

About the Far West of NSW

The Far West is the most sparsely populated region in NSW, accounting for 18.4% of the land mass, but only 0.4% of the population. Almost nine in every 10 people (86%) live in Broken Hill, with the remainder living mostly in the Central Darling Shire towns of Wilcannia, Menindee, White Cliffs, Tilpa, and Ivanhoe, or Tibooburra in the surrounding Unincorporated Area.

Dramatic population declines over the past 50 years have been directly linked to a significantly restructured mining industry. We would like to think this decline has stabilised and that there is potential for growth – there is sufficient infrastructure and housing to attract several thousand more residents.

Among the major population centres, Broken Hill and Menindee have an older demographic than NSW, while Wilcannia's younger demographic is linked to a high Indigenous population with associated shortened life expectancies.

Individual and family incomes are well below the national average – with Wilcannia's almost half the national average – and stated unemployment is about double the national average in Wilcannia and Broken Hill, three times the national average in Menindee.

Mostly, the region is well served by transport infrastructure and water. Broken Hill has a range of primary health care services and an 88-bed hospital supported by visiting surgeons and specialists, while Central Darling Shire relies on a combination of limited on-site resources supported by the Royal Flying Doctor Service and outreach services from Broken Hill and Dubbo. Broken Hill has two secondary schools and seven primary schools, while 'combined' schools in each of the outlying centres access government programs to address specific issues.

There is opportunity for the expansion and growth in tertiary education services in the region.

The climate, environment and existing arts developments are conducive to the region's developing tourism and creative industries. Extensive conservation occurs through a series of national parks and the region is conducive to renewable energy projects.

Known mineral resources retain mining as a key employer and the region is also considered highly prospective, with a number of smaller projects in various stages of development. However, the traditional mining/pastoral dependence is moving through a diversification process. Alongside tourism, there are emerging industries in goat and meat sheep production and horticulture is diversifying into cotton, malting grains, grapes and stone fruits. Education is a significant employer in each of the three main population centres alongside healthcare and social assistance, while retail is the largest employment sector in Broken Hill.

There are a number of projects in various stages of development, including non-mining infrastructure such as a wind farm, trade centre, events centre, film studio, aquatic centre, stormwater detention, water supply and heritage conservation – in addition to school infrastructure and a sustained interest in developing retirement and hotel accommodation.

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Vision for Far West NSW

Far West NSW will be economically diverse and prosperous, socially inclusive, environmentally sustainable, innovative and creative.

Please note that achievement of this vision incorporates:

- (1) Acceptance of the need for big changes in the region;
- (2) Significant shift of social attitudes, comfort zones;
- (3) Need for new skills to meet new aspirations and;
- (4) Recognition of the dire need for enabling technology (NBN).

The following comments and views explain how the NBN can contribute to achieving the vision of Far West NSW. These views are presented in dot point format. Please contact the RDA Far West NSW for further elaboration on any of these points.

The delivery of government services and programs

- NBN will provide improved access to a range of services not currently available eg improved face-to-face discussions between an office in Canberra and a “client” in Menindee or Tibooburra through the client being able to access video conferencing facilities, provided these become located in the region
- NBN will provide for a much broader range of services to be made available to clients in regions
- Clients in the region who are uninformed about services will be able to become better informed with improved access to information
- The NBN may finally eradicate annoying wait times on telephones when clients need to contact offices in Canberra or Sydney or Dubbo
- The NBN in Broken Hill will fortunately be based on fibre optic technology; there is concern about the reliability of wireless and satellite in our region’s smaller towns, and these concerns are based on the inadequacy of existing infrastructure

However, what we don’t want the NBN to do is:

- Provide an excuse to further reduce and strip down physical/tangible services from our region – there are serious concerns in Far West NSW that the NBN will become an excuse to

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stop further investment on the ground in our region, eg remove more doctors, nurses, teachers from the area, remove the few remaining government agencies, offices

- Let it be noted that one of the remaining Federal Government agencies located in our region is Centrelink – most federal and state agencies offering services have already been shaved; the region would like to see some benefits from the NBN that can facilitate future economic growth, not growth in welfare and social support agencies

In some of our remote centres, it is imperative for us that:

- Wireless and satellite technology is fit for purpose
- Sufficient infrastructure items, eg towers for transmission, are in place to do the job
- Some existing communications services in towns like Menindee and Wilcannia are currently very poor – will the NBN help to improve these communications services or will it further condemn the people in these towns to worse than third world communications status?
- Existing essential services in the region must become equipped with technology within their own organisations to maximise NBN benefits, eg health, education, police, corrective services
- Our region's council's are concerned that local clients will expect much more of them due to the NBN without due consideration being given by Federal and State Government funding agencies as to how the councils will meet these expectations in a realistic way (given shrinking populations, high welfare dependency of a significant portion of the Far West NSW population)

Achieving health outcomes

- The NBN is fundamental to provision of health services in the region and will be very useful to delivery of improved services in all health areas eg due to high speed transmission of medical records, access to specialist information
- Significant training and development activities already exist among health professionals, particularly via links with the University of Sydney and the hospital in Broken Hill – the facilities used must be maintained in a fit for purpose condition and upgraded as necessary to enable maximum NBN benefits
- Many people in our region would be more than happy to talk to a specialist in a high powered, fit for purpose video conferencing scenario with their GP facilitating discussions rather than travel 6 hours (drive one way) to Adelaide for a 5 minute consultation, put out more money for accommodation and then face another long drive home.

Improving the educational resources and training available for teachers and students

- Our region wants improved education and training, additional resources but time after time services are unavailable or lost due to lack of critical mass of students or teachers
- Some courses have low numbers of students demanding them, therefore courses are not available

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- Only courses with popular student demand can be offered 'in person'
- There are huge possibilities to extend the available courses on offer to any that can be packaged into online, video environments
- The NBN potentially could allow students in the region to access any tertiary courses anywhere in the country
- The NBN has a wonderful opportunity to provide equal opportunity to students in our region, eg currently unable to access many tertiary education services due to distance, high cost, as presumably, with the NBN allowing improved access to education, students here could access courses currently not available to them without having to leave the region
- The NBN has the potential to reduce isolation, improve access to information in remote communities, reduce travel times within the region and help Indigenous communities see meaningful improvements to their quality of life

What we don't want the NBN to do is:

- Increase bureaucracy due to cross jurisdictional issues and therefore reduce access and options for students
- Increase student fees so that services become too expensive
- Enable access to opportunity to tertiary study, for example, but fail in delivery due to no fit for purpose facilities in the region (eg in schools, TAFE, other training centres like Robinson College)

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

- The NBN will facilitate tourism and technology developments in our region which are predicated on excellence in the management of the local environment
- While a limited human footprint in some of the more fragile environments in our region is clearly an objective, we see the NBN as the enabling mechanism that can take our region to the world – eg use of video, graphics, film
- Technology services can be more effectively deployed in our region to document and record the region's cultural and historical information and the NBN can ensure quality, speedy transmission of data to any location

Impacting regional economic growth and employment opportunities

- Economic diversification (transition from mining to sustainable tourism, creative industries) will not be possible in this region without high speed, high quality broadband
- Engagement and retention of our youth, and the population in general, will not be possible without the NBN – the NBN offers incentive, motivation, high interest among youth, opportunity
- Encourage learning and social interaction through the exciting enabling features of technology, with fit for purpose, competitively priced services

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- The NBN will facilitate mining skills training eg virtual reality training centre links from Broken Hill to Dubbo to the UNSW in Sydney – without an NBN we could not hope to facilitate mining developments in this way
- Enable delivery of the suite of economic development projects tailored to suit the features and potential of the Far West region of NSW and which are intricately linked to the delivery of high speed, high quality broadband

What we don't want the NBN to do is:

- Continue to reduce real life experiences to what fits on a screen (television, PC, e-reader or smart phone) or to an impersonal, brief communication episode like twitter or mobile phone text
- Impose additional high costs on people in our region or exclude them from technology advantages and opportunities because it is too expensive (note this is an existing problem in some of our communities already – bills are too high even fixed line rentals in many homes; and in many homes in our region the fixed phone line was never provided to the home)

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

- The online retail shopping debate that hit the Australian capital city news channels prior to Christmas 2010 has been raging in our communities for some years as online shopping has ruthlessly competed with retail shop fronts in small towns – the NBN has a beneficial side on offer to rural and remote retailers – but only if these businesses have high speed, high quality broadband connectivity
- The NBN can present new growth opportunities for regional businesses – access to more customers, access to more competitively-priced products and other procurement initiatives (increased stock variety, different suppliers, diversity of geographic location of suppliers which helps to protect continuity and reliability of supply)
- The NBN can deliver technological efficiencies that can improve businesses at a unit cost level, improving productivity and boosting regional GDP
- The NBN offers scenarios for growth (and survival) that are otherwise difficult to achieve in our region in certain industries eg retail, tourism, creative industries, film, professional business services, finance and insurance, trades, training and education, many others

What we don't want the NBN to do is:

- Cause any greater reduction in the provision of goods and services in our region – the NBN must support local business, not kill it off
- Reduce training and education for students and employees in our region – the NBN should facilitate business and employment through targeted application that promotes sustainability of small- and medium-sized businesses

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Interaction with research and development and related innovation investments

- The Far West region of NSW is a prime location for R&D but absence of high speed, top quality broadband inhibits activities in these critical areas
- The RDA Far West business plan supports innovation and creativity in many prospective projects – many of these projects are designed to exploit local capabilities and assets and help our communities adapt new effective communication methods across our vast geographic region (eg online collaborative knowledge sharing, learning, support and mentoring services) and to do this we must have high speed, high quality broadband – we are acutely aware of how the interaction of the three technologies comprising the NBN will perform (ie fibre, wireless and satellite)

Facilitating community and social benefits

- The community leaders in far west NSW have been emphatic – there needs to be a level playing field applied for all Australians to enjoy the benefits of the NBN
- Access to quality and reliable communications in Australia is imperative; communication and data transmission services are essential services (like running water, like electricity)
- Minimum service standards for essential services should be put in place and monopoly service providers must be held to account
- In addition to pricing and supply of competitive services, it must be recognised that there are additional factors of note in our region, and probably relevant to other regions, that prohibit efficient communications using existing infrastructure and facilities:
 - Many Indigenous housing areas have no existing fixed lines in homes
 - Most Indigenous people do not have access to a computer in their homes or access to the internet
 - Significant reliance is placed upon pre-paid mobile phone technology – keeping up with the bills is difficult and often phones are out of credit
 - The RDA Far West NSW is expected to consult widely and provide community views on many issues – the NBN must help improve peoples' access to communication services, not increase costs or perceptions that the technology is too grand or superior for some Australians or beyond reach because the home hardware does not exist
 - Assisting with the closing of the gap and promoting social inclusion are two critical elements of the RDA Far West's role – yet communications with senior, respected Indigenous Elders is reduced to nought due to no communications for these reasons

We don't want the NBN to become an expensive icon in our region that is not accessed by our low socio-economic groups because:

- We fail to enable low cost access to these essential services due to

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- No consideration of the extra high cost of living endured by regional communities (eg all the people in Australia who don't live in a capital city or the hinterland of a capital city)
- Lack of ability of many people to meet ongoing fixed costs of communications, eg connections to home, and ongoing variable costs, eg monthly data use bills
- Lack of centralised or public-access to community facilities to access communication services, eg sufficient provision of PCs in public areas with free internet access
- Lack of training and support on how to use services, whether in the home or in a public space

The issues noted above are examples of direct feedback from Indigenous people in Wilcannia and Menindee.

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

- As mentioned above, the city of Broken Hill will be connected with fibre optic technology while Wilcannia and Menindee, for example, may be reliant upon wireless and/or satellite technology – we have to insist that the interaction of these technologies does not impact upon the quality of service or the speed of transmission within our region
- In Broken Hill there are clear aspirations for businesses to be able to professionally and proficiently transmit large data files – the NBN is critical for these existing needs, and it must be able to deal with projected significant increases in capacity
- Again, in addition to prior references to this point – existing infrastructure and services – the NBN technology must not be viewed as a stand-alone investment; there are numerous essential services in our region who will be depending upon sufficient budgeted resources to address existing inadequate hardware so that the NBN is relevant and useful, and is able to immediately deliver benefits
 - There is the story of a dentist in Broken Hill who has been waiting to connect his fibre optic network to a compatible infrastructure network in the region for the last 10 years
 - Will Federal, State and Local Government agencies in the region have the necessary funds to upgrade their IT assets to take immediate advantage of the NBN for the benefit of their community/clients
- We emphasise that the NBN presents one of the most important business and socially-relevant opportunities for the Far West region of NSW.
 - Without the NBN, we acknowledge that the region will be left behind.
 - Already, we note that the saleability of small businesses in our region is extremely difficult unless the owners have managed to keep abreast of technology in their respective industry sectors. For those who have not kept up with the latest plant, equipment, systems and processes that optimise return on investment, these businesses have failed to sell and the owners have subsequently failed to supplement superannuation needs as they had otherwise hoped.
 - Likewise, the NBN is the technology enabler for our entire region. Without competitively-priced high speed and top quality access to the Internet, our region will die and will become irrelevant.

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- Without the prospect of economic growth founded on the strategies identified as most relevant for our region, we fear that the population will continue to decline and the region converted to a welfare-dependent, stagnant backwater

We welcome the opportunity to further present facts about our region and our NBN needs to support the survival and ongoing sustainable development of our region as we embark upon this significant change management exercise to diversify our economy.