

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Russell Barkus, and run my own business 'Dokta Muzitek' from my home here on Thursday Island. I am nearly 50, and have been married to an island girl for 25 years. I am a Telecom / Telstra trained multifunctional telecommunications technician, and after taking a redundancy package, completed an adult apprenticeship qualifying as an electrical fitter / mechanic.

I commenced with Telecom on Thursday Island in 1981, obtained my STT01 qualifications, became redundant due to staff cuts in 1997 and bought the property next to my Telstra residence, as I love the people up here, and was committed to the area. I then became a sparkie until 2000, when my employer left the area. I decided to give small business a go and have never looked back.

I specialise in data and telecommunications, and service all the State and Federal Government Departments, including Local Government, Education, Health, Police, Defence, Aust Maritime etc. I also subcontract to many southern companies that have Government Department contracts, which saves a lot in air travel.

I have seen many changes since my first visit in 1979, and have worked on the old manual exchange, lead paper wrapped cable, wind up phones with batteries, the old telegraph line carrying radio signals down the Cape, the old valve AM radio transmitters, right up to modern computerised exchanges, high capacity digital radio systems, fibre optic transmission, and constant learning to keep up with it all.

The main catalyst to development in the Torres Strait was definitely telecommunications, since the islands were given the choice of being part of Australia when PNG went for independence in the late 1970's. Previously, communications were by HF radios operated by the Dept. Native Affairs, and were unreliable due to the distances over water. There was no town water, power, sealed roads or airstrips, or any essential services and amenities. The new phone system, albeit the old cantankerous analog radio hop system recovered from Western Australia, enabled the islanders to start to participate in politics, business, education, as well as exposing them to the national and international community. We flew 6 days a week to keep it running!!!!

We have now come to the point where business, development, and State and Federal Government administration of this area cannot function or grow without good quality comms and fast reliable internet access. Although we now have fibre all the way to Bamaga, then high capacity digital radio to Thursday Island and smaller systems to the rest of the Torres Strait, we still have bottle necks and many black spots. The system heading north from Thursday Island needs major upgrading, with dual redundancy, and mobile bases installed on all inhabited islands with communities.

Listed below are a few of the issues that I face on a weekly basis, as I travel all over this vast area with my work.

The high cost of installing and maintaining copper assets around the Torres Strait is prohibitive due to logistics, high transport costs, lack of Telstra staff, and ongoing salt air corrosion and lightning damage every year from the storms. Helicopter and plane charters are very expensive, and air travel is very time consuming in staff man-hours. The most cost effective option is to have most comms and data serviced by the Next G mobile system, as installation is quick and easy, and replacement equipment can be posted to the customer, saving on tech visits. Telstra has been the only company to invest heavily in comms infrastructure up here, and own all the best transmission sites, so they are the logical choice at least in this area for major investment upgrades.

I have installed Next G modems with high gain aerials for the Torres Strait Island Regional Council and have obtained 2 meg download speeds at some sites. I have also used my mobile phone as a modem with good results where there is a Next G base on the island. USB Next G modems and laptop cards also work ok, but once again - only with a Next G base on the island.

Due to distances over water, lack of mobile transmitters on all the islands is preventing fast internet access. Most computer updates, particularly Microsoft Vista, emails with picture attachments, accounting financial records, and anti virus downloads take all night at dial up speeds. Everyone needs to converse with accountants at tax and quarterly BAS time, and slow data rates make it very difficult.

The high cost of Marine Search and Rescue to the Federal Government can be reduced with better mobile coverage throughout the Torres Strait, as people in trouble can phone for help before the situation escalates and expensive SAR helicopters are tasked to look for people. This will enhance the requirements for mandatory EPIRBS and safety gear.

Our school children require good broadband access in the home as most information is now accessed via the net. I don't see many encyclopedias in homes these days, particularly in the remote bush areas.

The Horn Island Airport, which is the travel hub of the region, and one of the busiest regional airports, has no ADSL copper based broadband, with most business and professionals needing laptop broadband access. Business, Customs, and security are forced to use high cost ISDN or fixed data services. Telstra may also be afraid of losing call revenue to VOIP once ADSL is installed to all the aviation and Customs based business.

The local island IBIS general stores charge huge amounts to transfer money, and the rural transaction centres built on some of the islands are not practical for many non-techno adults to use. It is far easier to jump onto the banks website and do quick internet banking on line at home, and learn about the net in their space.

There are many tradies, professional people and local fishermen who need access to internet banking every day, as Thursday Island has the only bank. ATM's around the Torres Strait will only let you transfer to linked accounts to that particular card, so they are useless for transferring funds to other people or businesses.

No mobile base at Seisia Island community on the mainland makes it difficult for all the many tourists that visit the top, as well as the tradies and fishing tour operators that are based at the Seisia trades precinct. Seisia is the main entry point for most of the tradies doing work in the NPA area, who need good mobile and mobile internet access. All the overland tourists camped at Seisia want to phone home, check emails, and send pics of their adventures, and see how business is going at home. This all means revenue for Telstra. Most of the Next G signal from the Bamaga tower is blocked by hills at New Mapoon, south of Seisia.

Business and tourism cannot be engaged these days without good email and internet access. If the government wants the Torres Straits and Northern Peninsular area to start paying their way in society, then business, tourism and enterprise must be established and nurtured.

If the Torres Strait and NPA area is to develop economically and socially, and engage the mainstream and international community, it needs good broadband access for all, particularly as we are a remote area, and physically separated by lots of water and distance. We are region that has international borders with PNG and Indonesia, and good comms is needed to keep our finger on the pulse with security, drug and people smuggling, illegal fishing, and political incidents.

Many people move about in this area with their jobs and accommodation, so mobile broadband is more practical than land lines, as well as being a necessity.

I hope this info is of some use to the benefit of our beautiful and important area, and am available at any time for discussion, as high speed broadband must move forward.

Russell Barkus