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September 2019

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Dear Sir/Madam,

**Regional Connectivity Program – Discussion Paper**

Please find attached a submission in regards to the above mentioned inquiry.

Yours sincerely



Claire Wiseman  
Chief Executive Officer

## **SUBMISSION FOR REGIONAL CONNECTIVITY PROGRAM – DISCUSSION PAPER**

### **Background**

The Far North region of South Australia, as per the Regional Development Australia (RDA) Committee boundaries, covers approximately 80% of South Australia. The area has a land mass of approximately 800,000km<sup>2</sup> with a population of 27,500 and incorporates the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands. The region takes in the iconic Flinders Ranges and Outback region, popular and well visited tourism destinations in the State.

The main townships in the region include (but are not limited to) Port Augusta, Quorn, Hawker, Leigh Creek, Copley, Lyndhurst, Marree, Innamincka, William Creek, Oodnadatta, Marla, Mintabie, Coober Pedy, Glendambo, Pimba, Woomera and Roxby Downs. Some of these remote townships are between 800 - 1,000 kilometres from Port Augusta.

Connectivity and telecommunications is one of the top infrastructure priorities of RDA Far North and given that the majority of our region is remote outback, this is also one of our top challenges.

For information and more background, please see attached submission into the Regional Telecommunications Review 2018. This provides information on connectivity and communication issues across our region, for which the Regional Connectivity Program would seek to address.

### **Response to Key Design Principles**

#### **Question 1**

In reference to point three (Financial co-contributions will be required) it is worth noting that for some regional and remote organisations, it is not always possible to match dollar for dollar especially when aimed at high dollar programs such as this (see comments on question 3 regarding eligibility and question 11 regarding grant amount).

#### **Question 2**

It would be beneficial to open the program up to Local Government agencies, business organisations, industry groups or community organisations to broaden the scope of projects, especially if consideration is given to being flexible on matching dollars and/or grant amounts. Many remote regional communities have communications projects as priorities, however, they are sometimes of the smaller scale and don't necessarily fit into a major service providers scope or are outside the scope of the Mobile Blackspot Programs. It would be beneficial if they were able to apply through this Program to support these initiatives.

#### **Question 3**

Regional Development Australia organisations should be considered as “trusted sources of information”. RDA's are the main point of contact for many Federal and State grants and

programs and have trained and expert staff on hand to advise of opportunities and assist with the grant application process. RDA Far North staff have a sound working relationship with Federal and State points of contact and can provide direct linkages for applicants. In the past RDA Far North has also been involved in the hosting and promotion of grant and program information sessions and worked closely with organisations such as AusIndustry to do these sessions. RDA's also already have established relationships with major service providers and communities and are abreast of the issues and are ready to offer immediate support when opportunities such as this Program are released.

#### **Question 5**

Many remote and regional communities experience connectivity issues that require upgrades and new infrastructure but are not always eligible for many of the available programs. It would be beneficial if these communities were able to apply for funding through the Regional Connectivity Program. In order to do this a review of the co-contribution would need to be considered, as the communities would not have the full matching dollar for some of the projects. Is it possible to include criteria around the matching funding that is similar to what is used for the Building Better Regions Fund e.g. co-contribution is based on remoteness and therefore the more remote the community the less they have to contribute.

#### **Question 6**

Some of the key projects that occur in our vast region are small and macro cell installations. These are very beneficial for the communities themselves and visitors to those communities. Inclusion of these options in the program would assist in addressing those particular connectivity issues.

#### **Question 7**

The proposal that all funded solutions will provide retail services for a minimum of 10 years after the asset has become operational is a good guideline to adhere to.

#### **Question 8**

In relation to the eligible areas and focus of the program, it is worth noting that many remote areas are not necessarily "high economic, social and public safety" significant. The use of this wording may be interpreted to make some remote areas and communities ineligible. It is recommended that this wording be removed or replaced so that it covers all areas services by the NBN Sky Muster satellite service.

#### **Question 9**

We have no comments on the eligible and ineligible expenditure criteria.

**Question 10**

We have no opinion on the Commonwealth making contributions to ongoing operating expenses.

**Question 11**

We support the idea of the inclusion of a category for funding less than \$200,000 so that some of the smaller projects don't get overlooked when compared to the larger projects.

**Question 12**

We have no other design principles to add that could be considered.

**Question 13**

The assessment criteria is in line with other programs.



30 July 2018

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Dear Sir/Madam,

**Regional Telecommunications Review 2018**

Please find attached an amended submission in regards to the above mentioned inquiry.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Wiseman".

Claire Wiseman  
Chief Executive Officer

## **SUBMISSION FOR THE REGIONAL TELECOMMUNICATIONS REVIEW 2018**

### **The Far North SA Region**

The Far North region of South Australia, as per Regional Development Australia Committee boundaries, covers approximately 80% of South Australia. The area has a land mass of just under 800,000km<sup>2</sup> with a population of <sup>1</sup>27,500 and incorporates the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands. The region takes in the iconic Flinders Ranges and Outback region, popular and well visited tourism destinations in the State. The Flinders Ranges is also now recognised as a National Landscape.

The main townships in the region include (but are not limited to) Port Augusta, Quorn, Hawker, Leigh Creek, Copley, Lyndhurst, Marree, Innamincka, William Creek, Oodnadatta, Marla, Mintabie, Coober Pedy, Glendambo, Pimba, Woomera and Roxby Downs. Some of these remote townships are between 800 - 1,000 kilometres from Port Augusta, the largest city in the region (population of <sup>1</sup>13,808).

A region's comparative advantage can stem from various resources, such as its geographical location, availability of natural resources, the existence of industry clusters, access to infrastructure or the skill profile of the local population. These underlying attributes influence the types of economic activity that are likely to be successful. They also have implications for development initiatives, which are generally more effective where they build on an existing strength.

### **History of RDA Far North and NBN**

In 2012 Regional Development Australia Far North (RDAFN) in partnership with Regional Development Australian Yorke and Mid North was successful in gaining \$50,000 funding under the Funding for Regional Development Australia committees to maximise the benefits of a digital economy enabled by the National Broadband Network (NBN), NBN Readiness Projects Round Two, for the development of localised websites and supporting roadshows.

The development of the localised websites was focused on providing a more 'cut-through' content. They were central hubs of NBN information and resources which featured rich video content for educational and instructional elements of the NBN rollout, directories of NBN service providers, service provider registration forms, news and comments features, local stories and case studies, categorized online tools and software, roadshow calendar and event registration. Websites were created for each township that was part of the program e.g. portaugustanbn.com.au, roxbydownsnbn.com.au etc. The websites proved very popular as a central portal to go access to seek localised NBN information and was heightened by businesses/service providers having access to upload their own profiles and keep the information up to date. Unfortunately, due to the unavailability of ongoing funding, the websites were shut down 12 months after they were launched.

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<sup>1</sup> ABS Census Data, 2016

Roadshows, which were conducted with RDAFN staff, Stellar Digital (website developer) and nbn co staff were rolled out around the Far North and Yorke and Mid North Regions in the following townships:

- Coober Pedy
- Roxby Downs
- Port Augusta
- Port Pirie
- Kadina
- Clare

The roadshows proved very popular with very good attendance numbers at each session and the added bonus of having nbn co as a presenter enabled businesses and residents to ask questions about the rollout in the early stages.

### **RDAFN and nbn co Partnership in 2016/17 and 2017/18**

RDAFN has kept in close contact with nbn co staff in the last few years, as NBN has been rolled out in the Far North region. In the 2016/17 financial year the following promotion of NBN has been carried out in conjunction with nbn co:

- nbn co had a stall at the Augusta Markets event on 26 November 2016
- RDAFN held a Flinders Ranges Business Forum on 3 April 2017, of which nbn was a key presenter
- In addition to the forum above, nbn co had a presence in the township of Quorn over a couple of days to answer any queries from residents and businesses. RDAFN assisted in the majority of the promotion for this initiative.
- nbn co travelled to Coober Pedy and Roxby Downs from 23-25 May 2017 and held information sessions with local businesses and residents. RDAFN accompanied nbn co staff on this trip and also carried out the majority of sponsorship and organisation of the sessions
- nbn co carried out roadshows in the region, in conjunction with RDAFN, which included visits to Coober Pedy on 21 May 2018, Roxby Downs on 22 May 2018 and Hawker on 23 May 2018. RDAFN is currently working with nbn co to organise a roadshow for the Yunta area and further far north.

In mid-2017 RDA Far North carried out a survey of the Far North SA region to gain an understanding of the experiences of residents and businesses with the NBN. Attached is a summary of that survey (Attachment 1).

### **Issues Paper**

#### **Key areas of interest**

(RDA Far North carried out a survey of Far North SA businesses and residents in mid 2018 in relation to questions arising from the Issues Paper. Whilst the response to this survey was very disappointing (only 13 responses received), the respondents are a good geographical representation of the region and some of the answers are referred to in the following response to the Issues Paper key areas of interest.

**1. What are the main barriers to people in regional communities increasing their use of digital technologies and possible solutions for overcoming these barriers?**

One of the main barriers to people in regional communities increasing their use of digital technologies is access to these technologies and the knowledge to use them to their best advantage. Whilst the majority of the remote and regional communities now have access to the NBN via different types of technology, this doesn't always mean that the technology is suitable for their usage. Some of the businesses and residents who rely on these technologies for education and business purpose are hindered by the slow download speeds or congestion on the network. The reliability of these services is also key with users experiencing continual "drop outs" as well as the service becoming too expensive to maintain. Some of the responses to the abovementioned survey were "continual drop outs, expensive plans, data speeds", access to telecom technicians to fix issues", "The main barrier is internet speed, cost and provision, no question. For a household of five who use the internet, 140GB of on peak data for \$200 a month is daylight robbery" (from a very remote SA station).

**2. How are people in regional communities currently using their broadband service and how might they increase the benefits of using this technology?**

Many people in regional and remote SA use their broadband service for business, general communications, education, health services, keeping in touch in the community, weather reports, banking, news, fire alerts, road closures and other emergency notifications. One survey respondent said "with the move to paperless technologies, internet banking and online databases, the internet is used heavily in our business. Two out of three kids here do School of The Air, so they need it for schooling. My mother in law uses it daily for health services – online Occupational Therapy."

**3. What data-intensive activities are occurring in regional, rural and remote Australia? What digital technologies are needed for these?**

As outlined above, many remote and regional residents and businesses are performing data intensive activities such as education (e.g. School of the Air), health services, banking etc all which rely on uninterrupted streaming. Due to the location of these residents and businesses, they have no choice but to use satellite broadband.

**4. How can regional businesses better utilise digital technologies to maximise economic benefits?**

Some businesses and residents said they were interested in being able to use VoIP service, however, with the unreliability of connections this service is not viable. Some are also unaware of what else is on offer or available for them to use therefore education and training on alternatives, if they are in fact available, would be a way forward.

**5. What can be done to improve access to and uptake of telecommunications services in remote Indigenous communities?**

The language barrier is an issue when communicating with remote indigenous communities as many of them are not fluent in English with <sup>2</sup>65.6% of residents in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Lands speak Pitjantjatjara and 57.4% of households where a non English language is spoken. An article titled Pukatja: access to the internet available at <http://www.papertracker.com.au/archived/pukatja-access-to-the-internet/> outlines issues with communities in the APY Lands gaining access to adequate telecommunications. Access to the technology and education about use of the

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<sup>2</sup> ABS Census Data 2016



technologies available to improve telecommunications in remote Indigenous communities is key to improving the uptake. One of the survey respondents from a remote school mentioned “At the moment, students at the school cannot even access ‘google.com’ 60% of the time, let alone check their emails, which is important to keep up to date with their work tasks. Everything is so internet dependant or ‘cloud-based’ these days, and the students in rural areas miss out on so much due to the inadequate internet connectivity and bandwidth”.

**6. Are there practical examples of how communications services can improve the well-being of people in remote Indigenous communities?**

On <sup>3</sup>12 May 2017, the South Australian Department for Education announced an \$800k investment in enhanced internet for APY Lands Schools. This was due for completion in June 2018 and a review of the success of this rollout will be a good platform to gauge the benefits of improving access.

**7. What skills do people need to get the most from their digital technologies, and where can they learn these skills?**

The NBN Sky Muster vehicle which travels around Australia offers a great interactive chance for people to see how the NBN works and to ‘have a play’ so to speak. It has been suggested from a few survey respondents that practical on the ground demonstrations are needed e.g. trial sites, and this mobile vehicles offers that opportunity. Digital skills were also highlighted, however, some respondents were also unsure where to source the training required.

**8. Have you had any ongoing issues affecting your satellite or fixed wireless broadband service? If so, how have you overcome these issues?**

Please see Attachment 1 which outlines a summary of the NBN Survey that RDA Far North carried out in 2017. Please note that some of these issues have now been resolved, however, some are still relevant.

**9. If you are in an area with access to the Sky Muster satellite service and you have not taken it up, why not?**

Some areas, such as Hawker, have only recently been given access to Sky Muster however, there is still an option for people to retain their ADSL connection and some are choosing to do this rather than make the transition to Sky Muster.

**10. What economic or social indicators could be used to guide investment to further improve mobile coverage?**

Capturing the results e.g. success rates of any program or initiative rollout is key to determining what works and what doesn’t. However, this is easier said than done. In relation to the effect of the rollout of the NBN on businesses in improving their efficiency, some businesses are reluctant to provide information on this or do not track it to the detail required. A lift in business confidence in terms of the positive effects may be an indication or success, but once again, this is difficult to track. More investment in a region may indicate that the required infrastructure is available which includes transportation, roads, electricity, telecommunications etc and therefore investors are willing to invest in a region that has these readily available. If we refer to the South <sup>4</sup>Australian Centre for Economic Studies Economic and Social Indicators, an increase in any or all of these would indicate a regional confidence and therefore attraction of more

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.education.sa.gov.au/department/media-centre/news/800k-investment-enhanced-internet-apy-lands-schools>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.adelaide.edu.au/saces/economy/>

investment into a seemingly growing and/or sustainable region. RDA Far North has partnered with the Outback Communities Authority and Telstra in preparation of two funding applications for improving telecommunication in Far North SA. One of these projects, Telstra mobile phone coverage upgrade – Wonoka Hill - Stage 1 received \$500k (\$1m total project cost) under the National Radioactive Waste Management Facility Community Benefit Fund. Another project which focuses on the rest of the Far North SA region has been submitted for funding consideration under the Federal Regional Growth Fund, with total project cost being in excess of \$22m.

**11. Is information readily available regarding how to use devices to improve mobile reception in areas with poor coverage? E.g. Information about external antenna equipment?**

Access to information on how to improve mobile reception in areas with poor coverage is available, however, some residents and businesses don't know where to source this information from or they work with a certain provider, private or corporate, and the information they provide is limited to their preferred products. It would be beneficial for information on many different products or initiatives to be available in a central spot for easy access as well as ensuring that the technology is suitable for the area that it is enquiring e.g. what works in a city may not work in a remote area. The cost of some of these improvements is also out of reach of most residents and businesses, depending on what their needs may be.

**12. What emerging digital services will be of most benefit to regional businesses and what are the data needs of these services?**

The majority of respondents to the survey did not respond to this question or provided a "don't know" answer. This highlights that most people may not know what these emerging digital services are and what they can be used for. If considering education, health services and agriculture services, the data needs would most likely be high to very high, therefore if they were made available, with existing service delivery, they may not be able to be used or accessed as data and service provision is not adequate.

**13. What broadband services are people using other than those available through the NBN?**

It is understood that most residents and businesses are utilizing broadband services through the NBN with the majority being by satellite as this is the only technology available to the majority of the residents and businesses in remote areas.

**14. How can more competition be encouraged in the provision of broadband services in regional Australia?**

There are already many different providers that people can access to provide NBN services, however, some residents in the remote areas feel that they do not have critical mass to encourage more competition. Suggestions were also made, through the survey, that service providers need to be offered subsidies to provide services to these remote areas to encourage this competition.

In addition to the above responses, please see Attachment 2 for RDA Far North's submission into the Telecommunications Universal Service Obligations inquiry. RDA Far North was also involved in the panel discussions for both this inquiry and the NBN Rollout inquiry.

## Summary

- Many users in the Far North SA feel that they are still being overlooked in service delivery in terms of receiving what they perceive to be sub-standard data and download speeds and reliability of connections. These slow speeds and frequent “drop-outs” mean disruptions to business, learning and access to health services and other vital information, which can result in feeling of increased vulnerability.
- Barriers such as access to training and information and language need to be addressed in order for many remote communities to take advantage of the telecommunications services that are available to them.
- Limits in options available to remote areas means that they have very little choice in choosing technologies that are actually suitable to their needs.
- Readily accessible information on technologies to improve telecommunications services is required, including ensuring that these are affordable for the majority of families and small businesses, or are subsidised in a way to make them affordable.
- RDA Far North will continue to have a strong relationship with nbn co staff and to continue the tours around the vast region to promote the services available.

We invite and would welcome the Committee to visit the Far North Region and undertake a tour and to provide an opportunity for further input via presentation to this submission.