

*Verbal submission from Wendy Hick Camooweal Qld*

Main points raised by Ms Hick include:

- Sufficient broadband for schools and their students, especially the School of the Air
- Difficulty in choosing the right broadband provider and plan to meet needs and cost requirements
- The ongoing maintenance and availability of high capacity radio concentrator (HCRC) systems
- The impact of telecommunications on business
- Safety concerns
- Impact of changes brought by the NBN

Many schools in regional and remote areas of Queensland are using slow satellite internet connections, with some schools still using dial-up. Teachers do not have the specialist knowledge, for example language study, and students are unable to learn online with teachers elsewhere due to slow internet speeds. Some of these students are unable to complete compulsory subjects as a result.

Ms Hick believes improved communications could be the equaliser for schools in remote area, as these schools are already falling behind as a result of their remote locations and access the teachers.

Satellite internet plans are very expensive and it can be difficult for families to choose the correct plan to suit their needs and also their budget. The area was previously serviced only by Telstra but now several other service providers are available. Residents are unsure if other providers will be able to sufficiently maintain services and attend to issues in a timely manner. Ms Hick mentioned an idea to create a special educational internet link separate to household usage to ensure a reliable connection for students studying via distance education.

Ms Hick uses a high capacity radio concentrator (HCRC) system for phone services at her property. The HCRC systems are aging and becoming more difficult to maintain. There have been several issues in the main towers in the area. There are also frequent outages between October and December as a result of rain and heat. There is no mobile phone reception so when the phones are down satellite internet is the only means of communication. Not having an operating phone has negative impacts on businesses and also deters young people from working in the area.

There are safety concerns due to the unreliability of phones and lack of mobile reception. Satellite phones are used in times of emergency but are temperamental and very troublesome. Ms Hick believes satellite phones are better than nothing but are not a viable alternative to landline or mobile phones. Due to the national park nearby, Ms Hicks sees many tourists visiting the area. Visitors are often surprised to be without phone reception and are unprepared in the event of an accident or a breakdown.

Ms Hicks believes the NBN could potentially be a great improvement for people in the bush, providing everything works. There is great potential for families to access specialist help for their children, whether it is for health or education, without the disturbance and expense of long distance travel.

However there is some uncertainty surrounding the NBN and the impact of the rollout, for example School of the Air students may be using different forms of technology to join their classes online. This may have an impact on their ability to learn and participate depending on their available speeds.

Most residents in the area do not use mains power, with generators used instead. There are concerns about reliable back up power after the NBN rollout. There is also uncertainty surrounding the future provision of voice services due to the decline of HCRC services and the rollout of the NBN.

Given the increased reliance on satellite internet when phones are not available, Ms Hick is concerned about how internet services may differ under the NBN.

Ms Hick noted that most residents are realistic about where they live and understand the costs involved to service remote areas but also said it would be more beneficial to spend more initially to install reliable services for fewer people and avoid the ongoing cost of problems and maintenance in the future.