



28<sup>th</sup> November 2011

RTIRC Secretariat  
GPO Box 2154  
CANBERRA ACT 2601

***Via email: [secretariat@rtirc.gov.au](mailto:secretariat@rtirc.gov.au)***

Dear Sir,

The Pastoralists and Graziers Association of WA (Inc) (PGA) is a non-profit industry organisation established in 1907, which represents primary producers in both the pastoral and agricultural regions in Western Australia.

The PGA makes the following submission to the 2011 - 12 Regional Tele-communications Review.

- There is a real lack of good quality information available about the NBN in rural and remote areas. The PGA believes that the Minister for Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy needs to better engage with people living in rural and remote areas so that they understand that change is coming and what its significance will be to them.
- The method used to deliver the NBN to rural and remote areas is of critical importance as it will have the greatest impact on the ability of people living in these areas to get the best advantage from it. In remote areas, it is likely that fibre optics will not be the primary delivery service, leading to reliance on fixed wireless broadband and satellite.

Fixed wireless broadband will not support mobile applications. The high frequency radio waves used for this application are very short ranged, even for fixed applications. Proximity to the wireless base station will be crucial.

Heavy rainfall can occur for days on end during the wet season in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. This currently interferes with satellite communications in this area. By their very nature, remote areas are unsuitable for both these types of broadband service provision.

- As the NBN is a whole sale supplier, all the current retail supply problems will remain for people who live in rural and remote areas. Regardless of the way that a broadband network is delivered, it is the end use equipment that determines the quality of the communication system to the user. When equipment becomes unserviceable in rural and remote areas, it can present real difficulties.

Repair fees in remote areas often include a travel component. For computer equipment, repairs are sometimes not worth the value of the equipment. Sometimes, the correct part is not available and a return visit is necessary. Sometimes the problem

just can't be corrected by the serviceperson. In this way service and repair fees can quickly become a disincentive to continued participation in the digital age.

- There is no 24 hour power on most pastoral stations. They are off the main electricity supply grid and rely on diesel generators and solar panel arrays for their power supply. The need to replace phone hand sets when the copper network is removed and or decommissioned should be explained. Removal of the copper network will mean that phones will need an outside power supply and battery back up to remain functional.
- There is a pre-existing knowledge base in rural and remote areas about how improved communications have been implemented and this should be taken advantage of. The establishment of Telstra Country Wide in 2000 could provide a template as to how the NBN could tap into this knowledge base. The NBN Co should form a regional, rural and remote advisory committee, in the same way that Telstra Country Wide had an advisory board.
- Fibre optic cables in remote areas have proven to be susceptible to damage from various causes, including grazing animals.

When the Fitzroy River flooded in March this year, fixed line communications were cut for about two weeks when fibre optic cables at the Willare Bridge crossing were damaged.

This shows the vulnerability of communications in the far North and should be considered. Whilst it cannot be expected that NBN fibre optic cables can be hardened all around Australia, they should be protected in areas likely to be damaged. The Willare Bridge area is a natural flood plain and even when water levels recede these areas then experience abundant vegetation growth that attracts grazing animals. Unprotected cables are then exposed to damage caused by animal entanglement and dragging.

- Current fixed line phone services using the copper network still suffer from delay in some areas caused by the time it takes for the signal to travel down the wire and also "clicking" noises most likely caused by interruptions in the electric current flowing down the line. It can only be assumed that the NBN will correct these existing problems, but this should be confirmed.
- Communication facilities installed for remote area mine site use are usually decommissioned when mining stops. The use of these facilities is then lost to the surrounding community. There should be an NBN policy on this that maintains points of interconnect that no longer have a specific industrial use, but are leveraged off of by the community.
- Many primary producers already access the digital economy when in range, using a mobile or smart phone. They would typically receive market price information, but they can also access and update animal ID recording systems.

As portability is paramount in rural and remote areas, NBN should be tailored to give access using tablet computers and smart phones. NBN service provision should facilitate the use of this equipment.

- Video conferencing using fixed phone facilities would be of great benefit as primary producers always express a preference for face to face communications. This would

reduce the need and expense associated with travel to meetings, etc, especially in rural and remote areas. NBN should ensure that it can provide the capacity to service high bandwidth conferencing calls.

- Indigenous Australians should have much to gain from NBN as they typically live in communities where communications facilities will reach a larger group of people. It maybe that access to these facilities can be leveraged as part of the Community Resource Centres concept (formerly tele-centres). This could serve to integrate indigenous communities into the wider region as service providers.
- If a user or community opts to pay for the incremental cost of installation of fibre optic cable over the fixed wireless and satellite alternatives, NBN Co should establish a mechanism for canvassing constituents, and a decision making process, that results in a robust consensus decision at the community level.
- The NBN Co needs to recognize that rural and remote areas do have unique requirements.

Measurement of NBN coverage by population discriminates against rural and remote constituents. NBN is meant to be a nation building infrastructure project for the public good. It must aim for greater coverage than currently available in remote and rural areas and not just maintain the status quo. Whilst it is accepted that ones and tens of people may not get full fibre optic coverage, remote areas where there are populations in the hundreds must expect to be serviced to the extent that regional areas could expect.

- If a large amount of public funding is to be spent on the NBN, then the communications service in remote and rural areas must be better than the existing copper and satellite network. If NBN Co's goal is only to seek an improvement in speed, and not access to all Australians, this would be an unsatisfactory outcome. It will only reinforce prejudices in rural and remote areas about the supposed divide between the city and the country.
- A worthy objective of a national communications infrastructure construction project should also be the provision of mobile phone coverage along all national highways. Apart from the obvious benefit to the exchange of messages and information and the flow on affects to economic activity, it will also improve the safety of rural and remote communities and the travelling public.

Should you require further information from the PGA please contact me via the PGA or speak directly to Ian Randles, PGA Executive Officer at the PGA office.

Yours faithfully,



Rob Gillam  
PGA President



Ian Randles  
Executive Officer –  
Pastoral & Livestock