

1 December 2011

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2011–12 Regional Telecommunications Independent Review
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Dear Committee

Submission - Regional Telecommunications Review

The RDA Far West NSW appreciates the opportunity to provide this submission on issues of relevance to our region. This information follows our representations in Mildura on 10 November 2011. I appreciated the availability of the committee members at this session and the opportunity to provide information on matters of importance to us.

If you have any further queries or would like to receive more information on these matters, please do not hesitate to ask.

Yours faithfully

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Regional Development Australia Far West NSW



Regional Telecommunications Review 2011-12

Submission by RDA Far West NSW

1 December 2011

Introduction

Regional Development Australia Far West NSW covers north-west NSW, including the large unincorporated part of NSW, the Broken Hill City Council and Central Darling Shire Council. With around 20 per cent of the NSW land area and less than half a per cent of the NSW population, the region is an ideal location to get away from the stresses and strains presented by crowded urban spaces.

Mining and agriculture are dominant industries earning revenue for the economy and significant employers, whilst the health care and retail sectors have in recent times become the major employers. Agriculture's contribution to gross regional product in the last 10 years was poor due to drought, while downsizing due to the global financial crisis (GFC) resulted in mining redundancies.

There is now a significant push to diversify the economy to include tourism and creative industries (including film) amongst the future revenue earners in the region. Both of these sectors have an existing presence, and contributed to the economic survival during the drought and the GFC. Most importantly, these sectors appeal to our social and cultural traits by drawing upon the region's well-known capacity to be innovative and creative, and they will productively exploit some of Australia's least developed environmental and historical mining assets to generate new wealth for the region.

The key trends to be aware of concerning our people are that we have an ageing population, the population is generally declining and we have high unemployment, particularly amongst Indigenous communities. There is a tendency to fly-in-fly-out or drive-in-drive-out in government jobs, and increasingly in mining jobs. There has been a loss of jobs in the region as government agencies and businesses have merged and relocated jobs to the east coast, or withdrawn services. The incentives to live in small communities don't exist when essential services (especially telecommunications) have not seen maintenance or replacement investment for years. Poor Internet access and mobile phone communications are amongst the commonly expressed reasons why people elect to leave the region, if opportunity elsewhere emerges. We have a large Indigenous population and their communities generally lack access to Internet and adequate mobile phone communications services. There are many non-Indigenous people in our region to whom these comments also apply.

The latest economic update for our region can be found at this link, scroll down to "Reports": <http://www.rdafarwestnsw.org.au/default.asp?PageID=WhatsNew>. The report confirms the mining, tourism and agriculture sectors have a favourable outlook in terms of jobs or new projects.

The Digital Economy

Question 1

How is the use of telecommunications services and information and communication technology (ICT) evolving in different industry sectors and what is the impact of these changes in regional Australia?

Downsizing of companies, relocating people out of region to the east coast and the complete removal of government and business services from the region places a very high dependence on all forms of communications. Internet services are essential for most State and Federal Government services as there is generally no alternative presence.

Over the years, facsimile and postage services have become less important, though Australia Post is still an essential service in our region with other freight services still not at competitive levels for domestic users.

The key point to note for our region is that the fixed line phone services (including access to cheaper calls via 1800 or 13 numbers to out of region sites), mobile phone and Internet services are critical forms of communication in our region.

The quality of delivery of these services varies greatly across the region – from zero coverage or zero access to ordinary coverage and access. There are no super service deliveries to the majority of people. Larger businesses with access to capital have generally invested in their own ICT infrastructure improvements to meet their needs.

The increasing mobility of people and rapid development of devices that respond to mobility needs is noted. In this region, it must be remembered that many people in remote communities struggle to receive a reliable mobile phone signal, let alone a useable mobile Internet service.

Small business engagement in ICT is highly variable. Some businesses in retail think the future is to completely shut down a physical retail presence and go 100 per cent online. Others are informed and understand the need for ICT upgrades, but are too small to invest in ICT solutions to get them by until the high speed broadband services (the NBN) are rolled out. Many businesses don't realise yet what they don't know. A productive working knowledge of and experience in social media tools is yet to be seen in most businesses in the region, again due to not knowing what they don't know because of lack of exposure to these tools, lack of exposure to competitive forces that may normally compel swift acquisition of these tools and the frustrating user experiences and encounters with the Internet that is difficult to access, slow to very slow or that simply cannot be used because the business owners have no idea how to use it.

Listen to John Hart talk about his experiences in attempting to embrace ICT for his art gallery business which manages the famous works of Pro Hart:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KnIWtVgMT38>

Listen to Paul Seager, president of the Broken Hill Chamber of Commerce, talk about local business and ICT opportunities, awareness, training and needs:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rgjJLW9RRrE> [Paul yet to approve use in public domain]

- **In summary, evolution of ICT in our region is severely restricted due to variability of access and a generally poor or low quality of service, lack of ability to learn and grow with ICT advancements at the same rate as other people in the country.**

Question 2

What is needed to extend and accelerate the role of telecommunications services and ICT in delivering benefits to regional economies?

Some things needed right now that the community has informed the RDA Far West NSW about, and that should happen, include the upgrade of ICT infrastructure (hasten the rollout of the high speed broadband), and improved business knowledge and awareness of Internet use for the future.

- Continue to lobby for equity! The NBN rollout is urgently needed in our region. The NBN is one of the most critical features of this region's future economic survival. The NBN will help business grow, encourage innovation and competitiveness, expand markets, facilitate social equity and prevent a mini-third world developing on the doorstep of the east coast (ie prevent the digital divide phenomenon).
 - We will continue to do this within our own and other local resource capabilities.

See this video with comments from Chris Mann and Heidi Hendry, from Edgnett Regional Computer Services, speaking on how small business is affected by existing poor services:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SMJehc1nKKQ>

There is also a critical issue that has been raised on a number of occasions (by Central Darling Shire Council, and also residents in Tibooburra) and that is:

If fibre optic cabling is already known to exist in a region, as it is claimed by residents in Wilcannia and Tibooburra, why is fibre to the premises not a solution on offer? [NBN Co currently offer satellite across Far West NSW outside of Broken Hill, according to maps on their website.]

- Identify, train and professionally support ongoing development of several persons who can work in a dedicated business support centre (like the Enterprise Development Centre, EDC, or the Broken Hill Chamber of Commerce) and locally deliver services to small businesses across our region, targeting, for example, the following areas:
 - Website development, social media use, e-commerce. This is a train the trainer approach with the objective of developing and growing relevant skills and knowledge in, say, three persons in the region so that their knowledge can be successfully transferred to many local business operators in order for them to gain enough information about what they need to do to help themselves keep up with ICT changes and developments. It is a business help centre (not a consultancy). Development of the local skills will preferably include a mentoring program with several relevant existing businesses in Sydney or Adelaide (selected as there are air links with Broken Hill).
 - It is envisaged that from within the human networks of RDA Far West NSW, Broken Hill Chamber of Commerce, the EDC and the education institutions,

we could identify the local people with requisite business, social and ICT skills and knowledge potential to become the local “help”. We can readily identify the host organisation. We would seek external assistance in identifying suitable and willing mentoring business partners and grant funds for the training and development of our three people for the short term engagement (suggested up to three years).

- Identify, train and professionally support ongoing development of at least one Indigenous person from within each of our four key Indigenous communities in our region who can work within their communities to train and deliver services in technology. Given that within each community we are targeting potentially several hundred people, the awareness focus of the program could initially be broad. It is also expected that broad consultation about this program occur as usual, before the program is developed or finalised. Initial contact with the community working parties is critical. However, we expect a broad offering of technology knowledge is made available to start the consultation process, with the following areas suggested:
 - Computers, mobile phones, laptops, digital videos and cameras, iPads ... explain all there is to know about these devices, what technology is best for you, how the devices are typically used, demonstrate what is needed for specific uses, explain what you need to know, and how to maintain your equipment to optimise its life, demonstrate business uses and how different technology may be used for different reasons. There is so much basic education in this area that needs to be delivered immediately to stop the digital divide. It is thought that much of the training and awareness needed at the first level does not involve formal courses – keep it simple, keep it interesting, keep it short. It is also felt that much of the early awareness will involve site visits to offices and businesses so that demonstrations of how technology is used can be offered.
 - It is envisaged that from within the human networks of RDA Far West NSW, Aboriginal Affairs (NSW), the Community Working Parties in Broken Hill, Wilcannia, Menindee and Ivanhoe, the Remote Services Delivery Coordinator (Wilcannia) and other local stakeholders, we can identify the four community representatives who may have the requisite business, social and ICT skills and knowledge potential to become the Indigenous technology trainers and knowledge facilitators. Through our local networks we expect to be able to facilitate their access to premises for training activities and access to businesses, offices and work sites to enable practical site visits, technology demonstrations.
 - We will seek external assistance to (a) fund the wages and ongoing training and skills development of our four Indigenous technology trainers and knowledge facilitators, (b) fund the purchase of fit for purpose computer equipment, technology gadgets like those mentioned above and Internet connectivity for use in four community-based training facilities, (c) fund the ongoing operation of four retail packages of Internet connections in the four identified facilities for the duration of the training program, and (d) fund

operational costs, sundries at each training facilities for duration of program.

- Advanced Indigenous business potential. In parallel to the above program, we think the time is right to commence development of an elite group of technology-savvy Indigenous people who can demonstrate in their communities how to learn about technology and apply it in their business. This is an Indigenous business development program that will seek to exploit the enabling powers of technology. In this program, RDA Far West NSW would work with existing stakeholders to identify and select a small group of existing Indigenous people (eg they may be involved in art, film, tourism, retail, education) to advance their use of technology in an area that suits their field of expertise, a business need or growth potential (eg online sales, social media, MYOB skills and knowledge, etc). We will be very happy if we can identify two or three people for this program to accelerate.
 - Successful delivery of this program would mean that role models will emerge in our region. There will be support for their learning development and community people will observe the positive experiences. The younger generations in our region will have future business and employment mentors from within their communities. It is envisaged that the resources noted above would be needed, as well as (a) funds to purchase specific devices to help deliver the outcome, (b) assistance in establishing out of region business mentoring services.
- **In summary, we need to specifically and urgently assist the access to ICT knowledge and skills amongst small businesses and Indigenous people. Note that conventional competitive grants (one size fits all) have not been successful in addressing these needs in the past. Tailor-made solutions are needed to stop the digital divide in regional Australia and to help find solutions to the current challenges faced by small business.**

Question 3

The committee would like to hear from businesses and organisations about their participation in, experiences of, and expectations about, the digital economy. Examples could relate to specific sectors such as agriculture, mining, manufacturing or retail; business-to-business activities; productivity; teleworking; and the development of new knowledge-based industries.

The Far West of NSW is a mining province. Here are some thoughts from Matt Haynes, an ICT professional at Perilya Ltd's Broken Hill operations. Matt gives examples of negatives and positives about current and future uses of ICT in a mining environment.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M5tlm5grVN8>

Question 4

The NBN will help the range of online government services to continue to expand. The committee is interested in views and experiences about engaging with government services online, whether local, state or federal.

The growth and development of use of e-Government services in Far West NSW has a long way to go in terms of (a) ability to access online services given that many in our region do not have access and

(b) quality of access given that most people in our region struggle to boast they have fast, reliable access on the majority of days!

Specifically, the RDA Far West NSW and Broken Hill City Council are collaborating on development of the Far West NSW Digital Economy Strategy. It is currently at an advanced stage of development and there is a possibility of launching that strategy for a multi-month public consultation process before Christmas 2011. Part of that strategy will consider the Broken Hill City Council's development and rollout of future online services. The Broken Hill City Council is also a big advocate of the speedy rollout of the NBN. Please listen to the thoughts and views of the Mayor, Wincen Cuy and Councillors Dave Gallagher and John Groenendijk on all things technology, and, what was that about Bollywood in Broken Hill?

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FqexKJSmvBQ>

The Broken Hill City Council management team also have views on technology, the rollout of the NBN and our readiness for these major changes. The link below allows general manager Frank Zaknich and team members, Paul DeLisio and Peter Oldsen to say in their own words how the city will benefit from the new high speed broadband access, and how new creative industries like the film studio and associated businesses will grow and prosper and also how council online services will be enabled:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DhW43A110SQ>

Question 5

What are some examples of what you want to see happen to encourage greater participation in the digital economy by people living and working in regional Australia?

Access to reliable, high speed broadband will highlight what we know we don't know. Arguably, much opposition to the NBN project proposition is rooted in ignorance. The people in our Far West NSW region understand that the Internet is an essential service and will embrace it. The difficulty in the proposition here, however, is that current access is either non-existent or "soooo slooow" and therefore inefficient or unusable. Participation will greatly increase with access to a fit for purpose service. Our residents are behind city cousins since adequate Internet services here simply do not exist. Therefore, in addition to the training and awareness endeavours for small business and our Indigenous communities, the RDA Far West NSW and our appropriately skilled stakeholders would also like to design a tailor-made digital participation solution for our mainstream domestic residents, ie the broader community including elderly, unemployed, home workers, disabled people, stay at home mums and dads, and carers, and others who may be generally unskilled in computer use due to their type of work (eg underground miner, gardener, labourer, other people).

- Community Internet Engagement. The purpose of this program is to encourage use of the Internet to increase the quality of life, gain access to information, knowledge and services and to learn how to perform online activities, eg research, use social media, shop or enrol in training courses. The uses are many. The RDA Far West NSW and stakeholders like Broken Hill City Council, Central Darling Shire Council, Western TAFE and Robinson College, and jobs services agencies, can collaborate identify and deliver courses that suit the needs of people within the region. For example, Broken Hill City Council has facilities within the city library to

facilitate computer training activities in a limited way. Other resources like locations and skills facilitators are readily available in our region.

- Targeted course delivery for specific groups of people, and specific needs. The population in region is small and there is high variability in knowledge requirements. We suggest that registered training organisations, eg TAFE, Robinson, others, be allowed the time necessary to identify needs and develop courses to suit.
 - The necessary resources (ie what the mainstream one size fits all grants programs don't cater for) to deliver this program include funds for the provision of equipment and labour to enable programs like this to be delivered. There also needs to be a rolling program of delivery, course repetition to maximise participation, ability to be mobile in course delivery (go to where the need is) and access to online services and ability to cover costs of connectivity and other course delivery costs (electricity, fuel, incidentals). We stress the need for these courses to be tailor-made as, from past experience and based on feedback from RTOs in region, our capacity to meet mainstream grant application terms and conditions, eligibility criteria, lodgement timeframes and other competitive terms and conditions, generally puts our region at a significant disadvantage from the start.

Question 6

What are the main barriers to regional communities increasing their use of information and communications technologies and do you have any ideas for ways in which regional communities could progressively overcome these barriers?

Key barriers are substandard existing services, inadequate or no access, lack of knowledge of basic computer use in some sections of our region, lack of knowledge of how the Internet can be used and why you'd want to use the Internet for different purposes.

Solutions are outlined in the specific programs outlined above that we emphasise are likely to be more successful if they are tailor-made in consultation with regional stakeholders to suit our region's needs.

Regional Health and Education Outcomes

Question 7

Do you have ideas for ways in which high-speed broadband could enhance the delivery of education and healthcare outcomes in regional communities?

Innovative, creative thinkers in our region who represent the education and health service delivery sectors have been involved at very early stages in developing ways to deploy services through more efficient means enabled by new ICT. High speed broadband will:

- Reduce need for travel and reduce travel times to centres hundreds of km away;
- Expand service delivery to other areas;
- Diversify services on offer;
- Increase access to services;
- Reduce costs for residents (eg avoided travel, less time away from work when consulting specialists via video);
- Many others.

Question 8

The committee would like to hear from individuals and organisations about their participation in, experiences of, and expectations about, online health and education service delivery.

Health Comments

The current capacity of infrastructure to adequately meet service delivery expectations does not exist. Gary Oldman from the Royal Flying Doctor Service explains some RFDS experiences in patient care using electronic medical Records. Gary highlights the fact that a lack of adequate broadband capacity inhibits patient-doctor consultations, access to information and other tasks.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oLlIEmCzaAU>

The Far West Local Health District also use electronic medical records and use telehealth as far as technology permits, throughout the region. Both records management and telehealth delivery systems have limitations due to technology – poor video definition, data transmission problems due to file sizes or capacity constraints and lack of broadband service reliability.

Education Comments

The effective clinical training of medical professionals already takes place at the Broken Hill campus of the Sydney University's Department of Rural Health. More than 400 students visit the campus here each year. The use of technology in this campus is vital now and increasingly in the future. The mainstream medical courses, for example, are delivered in city-based universities, but the practical application of learning takes place in the Broken Hill Hospital. The improved, future technology connections will enable quality interaction with experts around Australia and the world, real time conversations between students and academics, quick access to necessary literature and information and expand the learning experiences in so many other ways. The University of Sydney is now seeking to extend this education opportunity across a number of other disciplines eg economics, business, engineering, as the learning experience is far more effective, and the students

perform valued work in the region. This is an exciting future prospect that is best described by Associate Professor David Perkins in the following video:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=htNB6c1sb9k>.

Education needs in our region continue to evolve as technology permits. The Western Institute of TAFE for example interacts successfully with students using Facebook. The future in TAFE education in our region is “TAFE Western Connect” which will take education delivery to new levels with greater diversification of courses in the region via ‘connected classrooms’, and improved access to courses by students. At present, TAFE is involved in helping to improve efficient access to education, other services and resources in the region through support of CLIP – centralised local information portal – a locally developed search capacity to facilitate interagency resource and information sharing.

In the following short video, TAFE Western manager Scott Dennis and skills and training mentor Pam Clarke, discuss some of the advantages that education and service delivery in our region will reap from improved broadband and they further explain the advantages of CLIP:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9TynuQ2T8n4>.

Registered training organisation, Robinson College, responds to community needs by offering online course access and niche courses to meet specific needs of the varying groups in our region. The future plans of the college have already outstripped the capacity of current technology to deliver! Listen to the current situation and future plans from manager Steve Baker:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3OmL8HtCz9w>

Communications Needs of Indigenous People and Communities

Question 9

Are there examples of the internet being used by Indigenous Australians in ways that take advantage of economic, social or cultural opportunities?

The RDA Far West NSW and regional stakeholders including schools, TAFE and other training organisations, councils, not for profit organisations and sporting groups have plans to engage Indigenous people in business development and job creation opportunities, but the significant barriers to broadband access and the additional barrier of affordability currently inhibit significant strides forward. These barriers also inhibit social and cultural development opportunities. It is imperative that we work urgently to stop the digital divide developing in Far West NSW. Access to the Internet is less than Third World standard in many areas at present. It must be remembered that many residents in Broken Hill, Wilcannia, Menindee and other locations, do not have ADSL access as fixed phone lines were never added to houses in significant pockets of suburbs. The Internet access in many locations is through mobile broadband and this is barely adequate in many locations where even the mobile phone signals are poor.

The review committee members may like to recall the comments about poor phone coverage by Central Darling Shire Mayor, Ray Longfellow, at the Mildura hearing on 10 November 2011.

Question 10

What further initiatives should the committee consider to improve awareness within Indigenous communities of the opportunities provided by improved broadband services?

Please refer to Questions 2 and 5 for the tailor-made, suggested programs that would help.

In addition, RDA Far West NSW and local stakeholders are very keen to further develop IPTV and Internet radio broadcasting opportunities in order to help stop the development of the digital divide.

Question 11

What recommendations do you have for remote communities to take advantage of the progressive increase in availability of high-speed broadband?

Please refer to Questions 2 and 5 for the tailor-made, suggested programs that would help.

Question 12

What more could be done to improve digital literacy amongst Indigenous Australians and within Indigenous communities?

Please refer to Questions 2 and 5 for the tailor-made, suggested programs that would help. We also mention the generosity of governments, NFP organisations who have donated hand-me-down computer equipment. This gear has traditionally been placed in community areas like rural transaction centres. If there is a positive response to suggested programs in Questions 2 and 5, greater capacity furnish these centres with more capable machines will exist (given very slow Internet speeds and poor capacity of old equipment to make the learner/user experience enjoyable.)

Consumer Issues

Question 16

Are there any significant consumer issues specific to rural and remote communities that you consider are not being addressed?

The matters raised in the earlier sections are all relevant.

Question 17

Do people in regional areas, particularly those in vulnerable or disadvantaged groups, have appropriate access to information about their consumer rights and the service options available to them?

This is likely to be a resounding no in many parts of Far West NSW.

Question 18

If not, what additional strategies could be put in place to assist individuals and groups to better understand their consumer rights and responsibilities?

Access to reliable, fast broadband will help bring our communities up to date with information.

Question 19

Are there specific cyber-safety challenges that arise from the way that communications technologies are being used by regional, rural or remote communities?

The matters raised in the earlier sections are all relevant.

Question 20

How can education and awareness of the risks of using mobile devices, such as smart phones, be improved for consumers in regional areas?

The matters raised in the earlier sections are all relevant.

Other Issues

Question 21

Are there any other issues relating to telecommunications services in regional Australia that you would like to bring to the committee's attention?

Continued access to free call numbers (1800) is essential.
