



**RTIRC Secretariat
GPO Box 2154
CANBERRA ACT 2601**

Attn: RTIRC Secretariat

**SUBMISSION TO REGIONAL TELECOMMUNICATIONS
INDEPENDENT REVIEW COMMITTEE REVIEWING
TELECOMMUNICATIONS SERVICES IN REGIONAL, RURAL AND
REMOTE PARTS OF AUSTRALIA**

A key concern for the Wheatbelt in Western Australia is that the previous and planned delivery of telecommunications and digital television services does not fully consider regional circumstances or offer flexible solutions to cater for all regional needs.

The Wheatbelt Development Commission has concerns regarding the current and planned mobile communications, NBN rollout and the digital television switchover specifically:

- Inequitable expectations placed on regional users coupled with limited provision of support;
- Previous and possible future impact to the social and economic fabric of regional, specifically Wheatbelt towns ;
- Requirement for more appropriate regional solutions to suit regional needs;
- Greater provision of an equitable service.

In areas where basic services are not upgraded and equal services not provided telecommunications may continue to be an impediment to living and doing business in the region. A number of additional potential issues related to the changeover to digital television have been identified and raised as concerns in the attached briefing note which should be considered as part of the WDC submission.

WDC is a Western Australian State Government statutory authority charged with the facilitation of economic and regional development across the Wheatbelt region. We work collaboratively with government and regional stakeholders, including Regional Development Australia Wheatbelt (RDAW) to provide a coordinated approach to address economic, environmental and social issues impacting on the Wheatbelt.

The Wheatbelt Region spans 154,862 square kilometres, more than twice the size of Tasmania abutting northern and eastern boundaries of the Perth metropolitan area. The region is home to approximately 75,000

Avon

1st Floor, 298 Fitzgerald Street
(PO Box 250)
NORTHAM WA 6401

T: (08) 9622 7222
F: (08) 9622 7406

Central Coast

Shire of Dandaragan
Bashford Street
(PO Box 657)
JURIEN BAY WA 6516

T: (08) 9652 2653
F: (08) 9652 1310

Central East

110 Barrack Street
(PO Box 420)
MERREDIN WA 6415

T: (08) 9041 1445
F: (08) 9041 2297

Central Midlands

Foundation Centre
13 Dandaragan Street
(PO Box 240)
MOORA WA 6510

T: (08) 9651 1770
F: (08) 9651 1910

Wheatbelt South

State Government Offices
Park Street
(PO Box 258)
NARROGIN WA 6312

T: (08) 9881 5888
F: (08) 9881 3363

www.wheatbelt.wa.gov.au

people, making it the third most populous region in the Western Australia. The region encompasses 110 localities/town sites which are managed by 43 local government authorities.

The Wheatbelt has a diverse population, with over 15% having been born overseas, and around 5% being Indigenous. The population is widely dispersed with only around 16,000 people located in the main service centres of Northam, Narrogin, Merredin and Moora. In 2004, the Western Australian Planning Commission forecast the population of the Wheatbelt to increase to 89,900 by 2031. However, these projections may prove to be conservative with more recent population growth predictions indicating a doubling of Western Australia's population by 2031.

The highly dispersed nature of the Wheatbelt population creates unique challenges for the provision of services and requires coordinated planning to attract investment in infrastructure and development and adoption of innovative service delivery methods. This is particularly relevant to providing appropriate telecommunications services.

Our concerns

Inequitable expectations placed on regional users coupled with limited provision of support

- The possible future requirement for ongoing maintenance and difficulty in obtaining qualified technicians and fair cost for service and is a barrier to technology use in the regions.
- Limited on ground regional 'telecommunications champions' or specialists assisting with education, clarification and support with regards to mobile coverage, internet access, NBN rollout and digital television.
- Local Government Authorities (LGAs) require increased resources and support. NBN rollout depends on information and resource base of local authorities. Although, WDC has encouraged LGAs to be proactive, the increased responsibility for LGAs to move into the social services realm has placed increased pressure on the efficiency and ability of LGAs to provide support to large programs such as NBN.
- With relation to Question 17 of the 2011-12 Regional Telecommunications Review Issues Paper, regional stakeholders including LGAs and WDC have not been able to readily access detailed information to enable informed decision making. In addition to the abovementioned point, intensive education, information and support programs are required not only for the recent telecommunications projects underway, but to assist with filling the knowledge gap resultant of the city – rural telecommunications lag.

Previous and possible future impact to the social and economic fabric of regional, specifically Wheatbelt towns.

- It is increasingly difficult to gauge or promote possible benefits of increased telecommunications service when the perception is that regional areas lack interest. There is an incorrect perception that many in regional areas are too traditional, apathetic or resistant to change with regards to technology uptake. In the 2011-12 Regional Telecommunications Review Issues Paper the ABS statistics on page 5 indicate that over 1/3 of Australians aged over 15 in outer regional and remote areas have not used the internet and that less than 30% of regional businesses have a web presence. When justification of service is based on demonstration of a commercially viable solution or current population figures it can be difficult to display demand with limited and inequitable regional services. It is also difficult to encourage adoption when access and service is limited and costly.

- Widespread mistrust has been created by an extensive history of mistreatment of regional communities on telecommunications issues and there is limited confidence in telecommunications related authorities. An overall lack of confidence does not encourage the technologically savvy, or business orientated to operate in the regions, specifically in the Wheatbelt surrounding Perth metropolitan area.
- Lack of a telecommunications platform equal to city counterparts in order to support most basic business needs. The Wheatbelt has increasing interest from small to medium enterprises (SMEs) and those wanting a tree/sea change but are unable to relocate due to limited telecommunications service.
- Restricted uptake of new technology. Specifically low coverage/access areas experience limited uptake due mainly to limited service but also to access to information and assistance providing 'real solutions', the cost associated with gaining the service and the level of difficulty for self-establishment/maintenance of the service.
- The social ramifications of an increased rural/city divide. In WA, and specifically the Wheatbelt region mobile phone coverage is limited. This is a safety issue for locals and a deterrent for tourists and business persons. Technology is allowing higher rates of mobility, increased desire to access the internet for business and personal use including social networking. The technology being used for the above levels and types of communication is not able to be used in a large proportion of regional areas, thus increasing the rural/city divide, creating a greater technology lag and contributing to future social issues. Digital television may be an area where the divide will potentially increase.

Requirement for more appropriate regional solutions to suit regional needs.

- A possible future increase in the technology/service gap. The intention is that high quality digital television, amongst an entire plethora of service and applications eventually be provided via fibre to the premise (FTTP). Most regional WA (and specifically Wheatbelt towns) are not listed for FTTP and engagement in technology may be hindered by the several complicated and costly systems individuals will be required to maintain in comparison to counterparts provided with a 'one stop shop'.
- Mobile and internet services are required for a large list of locations in the Wheatbelt registering no service at all or very limited service. Expectations with regards to mobile coverage and fixed wireless coverage will need to be managed. There may be confusion that a fixed wireless service as part of NBN rollout will provide much needed mobile coverage and this is unlikely to be the case. In addressing the latter part of Question 6 of 2011-12 Regional Telecommunications Review Issues Paper "do you have any ideas for ways in which regional communities could progressively overcome these barriers". One suggestion would be to have a channel of communication opened for LGAs, NBN Co, and State organisations so that partnership for mobile phone coverage and NBN fixed wireless can be realised.

Greater provision of an equitable service.

- With greater access to technology regional areas can remain competitive and an equal business platform to our city counterparts can be provided. This relies on quality service coverage and delivery. There is increased reliance and usage of technology in traditional sectors such as farming, with the ability to provide new economic development opportunities.
- Education and Health. There are current challenges associated with attracting and retaining specialists and staff within the medical and educational fields. Although there are

clear positive outcomes associated with access to increased telecommunications and technology, there is a question that the future service may not meet expectations and requirements in 'real terms' and that regional areas may face increased and compounded risk in these fields, which may ultimately result in loss of social services to some regions. (Attachment 1 refers).

- With relation to Question 13 of the 2011-12 Regional Telecommunications Review Issues Paper, feedback from the wider Wheatbelt community indicates that information related to mobile phone coverage, such as using an external antenna or choosing particular phones that are better suited to regional and remote areas has not been readily available, and the expectation has been for the client to visit a usually metropolitan based phone outlet shop, where information is often inconsistent and not relevant to regional areas.
- There is a need to ensure that a copper ADSL/2+ internet service continues for rural residents who are scheduled for a NBN satellite service. There is a strong belief and some anecdotal evidence that satellite service is unreliable.
- Creating equal use of technology by ensuring that service and access is equal for city and country counterparts. Not being able to use technology creates lags, and an ongoing divide between country and city.
- Using medium sized regional centres as pilot sites, and next release sites. Prioritising the regional rollout of NBN has been marketed as ensuring non-metropolitan communities are amongst the first beneficiaries of reliable high-speed broadband.

Possible solutions

- Establish regional placement of specialists by working with regional stakeholders, WDC, RDA Wheatbelt and Department of Commerce. Regional 'champions' could provide technical support leading up to, through and following the digital television switch, the Regional Mobile Communications Project (RMCP) and the NBN rollout.
- Adopt regional level solutions, including the restructuring of subsidies. The Wheatbelt's unique population distribution makes it highly suitable for piloting innovative methods of service delivery. If models are successful in delivering quality services to the Wheatbelt dispersed communities they will be readily transferable to the majority of other regional locations in Australia. The WDC is keen to continue working collaboratively with government, industry and regional stakeholders, including Regional Development Australia Wheatbelt (RDAW) to identify and adopt regional level solutions.
- Development of an ongoing telecommunications and digital television regional education and awareness program.
- Financial and/or subsidy support for the introduction of, and ongoing maintenance and support required during technology upgrades in regional areas. We support that uniform national wholesale prices will be incorporated as part of the NBN rollout so that regional areas can pay the same prices as people in the city. This needs to extend to include ongoing servicing and maintenance including access to technicians and support at a competitive cost.
- With regard to initial technology and telecommunications installation and furthermore future breakdowns and technological issues we need to ensure that regional cost equities and regional technical support mechanisms are being put in place. We support fair and equal access to affordable high speed broadband. If the new service is inequitable or inadequate, what process of remediation exists after the fact. For example, after the rollout of NBN in a specific location, or the switch to digital television.
- A communication 'channel' specifically designated to the concerns of regional stakeholders. This would be for, and involve representatives from LGAs, NBN Co, RDCs, Department of Commerce and other State organisations so that partnerships for mobile phone coverage and NBN fixed wireless can be realised.

- Restructuring of subsidies. The impact of introducing digital television on small communities with existing re-transmission sites needs analysis and consultation at the local level, especially for communities with over 250 people. We believe that the amalgamation of funds allocated for private residential households for a mass distribution method may prove more viable. Those WA communities that are substantially smaller, and unlikely to service 250 people through retransmission, need access to individual subsidies to become available immediately.

The attachments to this document provide more detailed information on the Wheatbelt regions telecommunication issues and some specific examples. Please include these as part of our submission to the Review.

In summary: Without significant rethinking of current telecommunications policy and strategy, Wheatbelt residences risk being further disadvantaged in terms of

1. Maximising business opportunities through e-business
2. Accessing essential services such as health and education
3. Fostering attraction and retention of workers to the region in terms of both the above and ability to connect to the broader world through social media.

Should you require further information, clarification or to discuss the matters raised in this submission please contact Rebecca Kelly, Senior Regional Officer on (08) 96511770.

Yours sincerely,



Wendy Newman
Director

7 December 2011

Enc:

Attachment 1: Education/Health example

Attachment 2: WDC Digital Television Fact Sheet

Attachment 3: WDC Telecommunications Fact Sheet