



Regional  
Development  
Australia

TOWNSVILLE  
AND NORTH WEST  
QUEENSLAND INC

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Dear Minister

*Re: Queensland Digital Economy Strategy*

On behalf of the Regional Development Australia Townsville and North West Queensland (RDA) Committee, I write to congratulate you and your Department on developing the Draft Queensland Digital Economy Strategy and your consultation process to help finalise it for implementation. We fully support the development of the Strategy and welcome this opportunity to provide input to your consultation process.

### **Background to RDA's Interest in the Draft Queensland Digital Economy Strategy**

Regional Development Australia is an established network of 55 Committees across Australia made up of local community leaders who are volunteers to champion the development of long-term sustainable communities. In Queensland there are 12 RDA Committees. (Refer to [www.rda.gov.au](http://www.rda.gov.au))

The Regional Development Australia Committee for Townsville and North West Queensland (RDA) is an incorporated not-for-profit association and has twelve ministerially appointed members. Funding is provided by the Federal Government and in-kind support is provided by the Queensland Government. The Committee's purpose is to achieve a prosperous, sustainable, cohesive and liveable region. Our region covers 15 local government areas of Boulia, Burdekin, Burke, Carpentaria, Charters Towers, Cloncurry, Doomadgee, Flinders, Hinchinbrook, McKinlay, Mornington Island, Mount Isa, Palm Island, Richmond and Townsville over 449,190 km<sup>2</sup>, accounting for approximately a quarter of Queensland's total land mass. (Refer to [www.rdanwq.org.au](http://www.rdanwq.org.au))

RDA has developed and regularly updates a Regional Roadmap which informs the Federal and Queensland Governments of the priorities that need to be addressed based on the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Regional Economic Development Framework. RDA works with partners across the region to progress priorities that support the long term vision. (Refer to <http://www.rdatanwq.org.au/regional-roadmap>)



An Australian Government Initiative



Queensland Government

The Townsville and North West Queensland region contributes strongly to the national economy as a very significant mining, grazing and agricultural area with the majority of product going to export markets. Tourism and services are also very important for their economic and employment contributions. However, economic and social infrastructure is lacking or in poor condition in much of the rural and remote parts of the region. This is particularly the case with communications infrastructure.

In our list of *Transformational Engine Starter Priorities*, Communications infrastructure is ranked highly. *“Communications improvements across the region including mobile and high speed broadband access – this will provide (1) residents, in particular those in rural and remote areas, with access to health, education and other online services and (2) industry with access to productivity improvements and markets.”*

We believe mobile and high speed broadband infrastructure will be powerful enablers for developing long term sustainable communities, greater equity amongst communities and individuals in the delivery and access to services, and new opportunities for employment and social connectedness. Critical to this success is the high speed connectivity to and between rural and remote communities such as those in North West Queensland that frequently rely upon regional city hubs for health, education, transport, freight and other services. Real time interaction can only be as good as the lowest common denominator speed so equal access to fibre optic cable in as many locations as possible will enable high speed broadband to make a positive impact in areas such as health, education and government service delivery and business to business communications. High speed broadband gives all levels of government an opportunity to ensure our rural and remote areas are not severely disadvantaged.

**In response to the consultation questions, we provide the following comments.**

- 1) We keenly support the development of the Queensland Digital Economy Strategy and look forward to its implementation.
- 2) We believe there is a critical need to have a Queensland Government strategy to display leadership and guide all stakeholders towards common goals and opportunities.
- 3) The Australian Government has a key role to deploy national policy and major communications infrastructure.
- 4) The Queensland Government has a key role and the power and ability to affect change through policy, infrastructure development and program delivery. It has a distinct role to ensure equity of access and service delivery to all Queenslanders, regardless of where they live. It also has the opportunity to drive the digital agenda and productivity through its engagement with local government authorities. For example, the Queensland Government can put into place new digital initiatives to avoid duplication across each of the councils in the State.

- 5) Local government and local stakeholders like RDA can play a support role to advocate for embracing the digital economy and link to opportunities to learn and engage more.
- 6) The vision is bold and we agree with it.
- 7) We agree with the strategic objectives.
- 8) The proposed four focus areas make good sense.
- 9) In the case of the Queensland Government focus area, I would expand that to (a) include what the Queensland Government can do to support all councils across the state to avoid duplication of effort and (b) stress that to create savings in the delivery of services online, there must first be an investment into infrastructure to enable reliable access from rural and remote communities. Without such investment, rural and remote communities will become even more disadvantaged in their access to government services.
- 10) In the case of the focus area on people and communities, we strongly support the need to close the gap/ digital divide that is emerging from (a) a lack of infrastructure and (b) also a lack of access to technology and support for its use. We believe that partnerships with local governments would be valuable. We note however that most Councils are ill-equipped to take on extra financial burdens.
- 11) In the case of the focus area on business and industry, we support the recommended actions. In a practical sense, innovative companies are already embracing the digital economy. Companies that are not yet embracing the digital economy need (a) examples of case studies and peer comments on the value of engaging in the digital economy, (b) very labour intensive one-on-one mentoring to get them engaged and (c) access to free and very reasonably priced tools to help with planning and implementing their individual digital strategies.
- 12) In the case of the focus area on the digital industry, we believe this makes good sense and recognises there are significant opportunities. We stress however that there are opportunities for developing our digital industry not just in South-East Queensland, but across the state. This reinforces the need for state-wide, high capacity, high speed communications infrastructure.

**The following are some additional comments we wish to add based on our earlier input to a national enquiry on the NBN roll-out.**

**1. Delivery of government services and programs**

- a. High speed broadband will ensure greater equity across Australia's communities in regard to access to government services. Federal, state and local governments and communities will be able to communicate more readily using online services including web-based video-conferences, improving the reach, efficiency and productivity outcomes for governments and customers alike. High speed broadband is:
  - i. particularly relevant for rural and remote communities such as Normanton, Boulia and the like which suffer from a lack of access to services given they are thousands of kilometres from some government services;
  - ii. particularly relevant for communities that are regularly isolated by severe weather events such as floods and cyclones in the north Queensland tropics, Gulf country and Channel Country; and
  - iii. able to assist local government, particularly in rural and remote areas, to attract and keep staff as they will consider all aspects of a lifestyle in making their decisions about employment locations.

**2. Achieving health outcomes**

- a. Regional Australians are at a disadvantage when it comes to access to health services and research shows that health outcomes, for example in the treatment of cancer, are generally worse in regional areas. High speed broadband will enable greater and more efficient interaction between specialists in regional and metropolitan centres and their patients and local GPs.
  - i. Patients and the governments that sponsor patient transfers will reduce their expenditure on travel to specialists and patients will save money and time involved in their travel for specialist appointments. Currently a visit from a remote area to a specialist can often cost in excess of \$2,000 for transport and accommodation and a week of time away from family and work.
  - ii. Local GPs will learn through the process of being engaged in the discussions between a specialist and the patient, leading to more informed referrals and treatments in the future.
  - iii. Student placements in regional areas will benefit from access to high speed broadband links back to the training university.

**3. Improving the educational resources and training available for teachers and students**

- a. Equal access to education for all Australians can only be reasonably provided by access to high speed broadband.
  - i. Students in regional areas will gain access to resources such as larger city libraries and online information and online tutorials. For example, many

universities now offer online programs, but the unreliability of current broadband services makes access to these minimal in regional areas.

- ii. Teachers will have greater access to professional development, resources for preparing classes and collaboration and support through teacher networks. This is specifically relevant for small rural and remote schools.

#### **4. The management of Australia's built and natural resources and environmental sustainability**

- a. Much of Australia's wealth is generated from regional, rural and remote communities working in the mining, agricultural, grazing and tourism sectors to name just a few. High speed broadband will enable:
  - i. the development of Smart Grid applications to more efficiently manage electricity use to reduce overall demand and hence making a positive impact on the environment;
  - ii. real time and remote monitoring and management of agricultural and grazing and other commercial properties, roads, parks and community facilities, leading to the ability to respond more quickly to weather and emergency events ensuring safety of people and assets; and
  - iii. more monitoring for the gathering of information to better understand our natural environment to make more informed decisions in regard to its access, use, management and conservation. For example, more monitoring stations can be positioned to provide real time information from remote sites.

#### **5. Impacting regional economic growth and employment opportunities**

- a. High speed broadband will encourage the development of new knowledge based employment in traditional industries as well as information and technology focussed businesses. New opportunities will open up such as data management centres, cloud server services and business process reengineering for companies to streamline operations using high speed broadband.
- b. Equity of access will help the Queensland Government in pursuing its decentralisation strategy.

#### **6. Impacting business efficiencies and revenues, particularly for small and medium business, and Australia's export market**

- a. It is expected that productivity will increase in all types of businesses as a result of being able to transfer larger amounts of data at a faster speed. Such productivity increases will help build resilience for small and medium sized businesses in particular.
- b. Businesses will be able to communicate more readily with markets, customers and suppliers through web-based video conferences and online services, reducing the tyranny of distance and saving time and money on travel costs (and a saving in emissions) for meetings in Australia and overseas. There are also potential savings in shipping and transport time and costs (and a saving in emissions) by reducing unnecessary movement of stock for sampling if 3D printing technology can be used.

- c. Businesses will be able to deliver access to training for employees through web-based online delivery from institutions that are thousands of kilometres away. This will help attract and keep staff and save time and money for such businesses.

#### **7. Interaction with research and development and related innovation investments**

- a. Investment opportunities into projects in remote areas will be enhanced by access to high speed broadband. Mines and power generation, such as proposed wind farms, will have more effective operational access to head offices, investors, technicians and researchers.
- b. Universities will now be able to communicate with researchers, lecturers and students off-campus using the same high speed broadband that they previously had only on campus. This will allow more flexibility in the delivery of classes and collaboration on projects as part of course work. Field work will be enhanced by high speed broadband linkages back to the university.
- c. Research institutions, universities and others involved in innovation will be able to connect better with each other, businesses including investors, governments and with communities, not only locally and nationally, but also internationally. This will nurture closer relationships, reduce the silo effect, and lead to faster progress in joint initiatives – such as collaboration on major health research to find solutions for disease prevention and management.

#### **8. Facilitating community and social benefits**

- a. High speed broadband will enable:
  - i. Easier and faster access to government and non-government organisations' services, especially for those in rural and remote areas; and
  - ii. Building of networks between communities to share more information in addressing issues and finding solutions.

Currently the Townsville and North West Queensland region is not well served in terms of quality and reliability of communications services. However, our communities are ready to embrace the opportunities that improved infrastructure and the digital economy will deliver.

We will be pleased to provide further comment as appropriate and look forward to updates on the progress of the Queensland Digital Economy Strategy.

Yours Sincerely



**Paul Woodhouse**

Chairman



