

30 September 2021

Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee  
2021 Regional Telecommunications Review Secretariat  
Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications  
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SUBMITTED VIA ONLINE SURVEY

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Dear Committee Members

## 2021 REGIONAL TELECOMMUNICATIONS REVIEW SUBMISSION

Regional Development Australia (RDA) Kimberley congratulates the Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee (the Committee) on the public consultation to-date as part of the 2021 Regional Telecommunications Review. RDA Kimberley participated in the virtual session held 9 August 2021 and felt that all participants were given the opportunity to input. There was good information from small business, tourism, pastoral, aviation, and residents; with the East Kimberley being particularly well represented.

RDA Kimberley acknowledges the Kimberley is a complex region for telecommunications service provision due to:

- Scale of geography
- Disparate, transient, and seasonal population
- Number of remote Aboriginal communities
- Low digital literacy indicators
- Subject to cyclone and seasonal weather events
- High cost of doing business
- Lack of commercial viability for service providers (market failure)

Through building partnerships and economies of scale, many regional based organisations are striving to further the Kimberley's human capital and economic development. The region possesses rich natural and cultural assets; internationally recognised tourism sector; improving transport infrastructure to external markets; and diversification opportunities associated with value-add agriculture and pastoral enterprises. This submission highlights the interdependence between the quality of telecommunications in the Kimberley and maximising community and economic development outcomes.

RDA Kimberley raised the following points during the public consultation and will expand on these in this submission:

1. Spread and access to different mobile service providers
2. Accessing online services
3. Mobile Black Spot and Regional Connectivity Programs
4. Infrastructure resilience



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## 1. Spread and access to different mobile service providers

The Kimberley has predominately been serviced by Telstra for mobile coverage. Several of the recent government supported investments have awarded contracts to Optus after a competitive procurement process (e.g. Kalumburu, Purnululu National Park, Ellenbrae Station, Gibb River Station, El Questro Station, Emma Gorge, Home Valley Station, and Imintji Roadhouse). While competition between service providers typically results in better outcomes for the consumer, there are disadvantages to this model in a Kimberley context that should be considered.

Many residents and service agencies now need to have both Telstra and Optus contracts to ensure connectivity while moving across the Kimberley. The associated costs for multiple contracts is problematic for Aboriginal communities with high socio-economic disadvantage and transient populations. It is particularly pertinent given the Federal Court's 2021 ruling relating to unaffordable contracts for Aboriginal consumers. Conversely, international visitors in the Kimberley can access service from all towers.

RDA Kimberley has participated in several discussions lead by RDA Grampians who is advocating for the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) to rethink domestic mobile roaming. Enabling domestic mobile roaming applied to government funded infrastructure could be an option to ensure equity and safety outcomes for Kimberley communities.

There is considerable push back from Telstra and Optus based on past ACCC enquiry findings. While there are likely to be other options for consideration and without understanding the technical challenges to enabling domestic mobile roaming, RDA Kimberley does advocate for an improved model to address these community safety, emergency response and equity of access concerns. Government funded telecommunication infrastructure should have optimal benefit for communities rather than benefit for telecommunication companies.

## 2. Accessing online services

Increasingly services are being delivered through internet and mobile applications often with little or no alternative options (e.g. MyGov, Centrelink, banking etc). Many remote communities share devices between residents and have unreliable telecommunications services, raising privacy and access issues. This is heightened when government payments are dependent on accessing these services.

Ensuring populations in remote communities and/or those with low digital literacy are not 'falling through the cracks' or being further disadvantaged should be a priority for those Government Departments and service providers moving to online and app interfaces.

## 3. Mobile Black Spot and Regional Connectivity Programs

There is risk of the Kimberley being 'left behind' if telecommunication service provision is driven by telecommunication company commercial models. State and Federal Governments will need to lead capital investments and service provision standards in many parts of the Kimberley to ensure access to mobile and internet services meaningfully contribute to community and economic development outcomes.



Funding regional blackspot programs in the Kimberley, particularly on the major highways and Gibb River Road, will need to be sustained. The program criteria may need reviewing as service gaps are increasingly in commercially marginal areas or areas of market failure for telecommunication companies.

The urgency for program review is increasing with large parts of the Kimberley still reliant on 3G network, which is being decommissioned in 2024.

There are several private sector and government investments underway or in development in the Kimberley which are expected to stimulate the employment market and contribute to regional domestic growth. This includes:

- **Agriculture, horticulture and value-add processing** e.g. expansion in the Ord River Irrigation Area (e.g. cotton gin), Seafarms' Project Sea Dragon; Fresh Produce Group's asparagus and table grapes production; Kilito Station's micro abattoir.
- **Government funded projects** e.g. relocation of Broome Prison; Broome Boating Facility construction; Horizon Power's Customer Experience Centre; NBN fibre in Halls Creek.
- **Supply chain infrastructure** e.g. Kimberley Marine Offloading Facility construction; Broome International Airport upgrades; road upgrades for Great Northern Highway, Gordon Downs, Duncan and Cape-Leveque roads.
- **Mining, oil and gas** e.g. Kimberley Mineral Sands' Thunderbird project; Inpex's ongoing offshore investment; Buru Energy's oil and gas exploration and production in the Canning Basin; Woodside's Browse Basin project; Agrimin's Lake Mackay Potash project; Boab Minerals' Sorby Hills project; restart of Panoramic Resources' Savannah nickel mine.

The telecommunication requirements and pressure on existing networks by the direct and indirect increase in population and industry activity associated with these investments should be front-of-mind for Governments and telecommunication companies.

#### 4. Infrastructure resilience

The Kimberley needs telecommunications infrastructure resilience to deal with natural disasters and seasonal events. This includes events that occur in the Pilbara which also cut the Kimberley off services.

Service reliability for mobile and internet networks during the peak tourist season was also challenged throughout the Kimberley in 2021. The seasonal population of the region far exceeds its residential population. Combining permanent residents and non-permanent visitors gives an estimate of the Kimberley's 'service' population i.e. the population that the Kimberley (and its businesses, facilities and infrastructure) must service each year. As an example, Broome has a resident population of approximately 17,000 people. Accounting for tourism visitors, short-stay workers, business travellers, and people from outer communities using Broome as a base, the service population can exceed 25,000 people on any given day.

The reliability issues across the region impact business operations, liveability, and the tourist experience.



As part of the Australian Government's national RDA network, RDA Kimberley has an active and facilitative role in our communities with a clear focus on growing a strong and confident regional economy that harnesses the Kimberley's competitive advantages, seizes economic opportunities, and attracts investment. Telecommunications is key to living, investing, and doing business in the region. We are well placed to play a facilitative role between Kimberley communities and businesses and ongoing State and Federal Government telecommunications programs. We look forward to working with the Committee to ensure the 2021 Review achieves on-ground outcomes for our regional communities and economy.

We welcome the opportunity to discuss this feedback further. Please feel free to contact Janine Hatch – Director via [REDACTED]

Yours sincerely



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